

APOCALYPTIC PROGRESS:
THE POLITICS OF CATASTROPHE IN THE ART OF JOHN MARTIN,
FRANCIS DANBY, AND DAVID ROBERTS

By

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For Elizabeth

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Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Figures.....	xii
Abstract.....	xxi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Martin, Politics, and the Apocalypse	3
Historiography and Methodology	5
The Politics of Early Nineteenth-Century Religious Art.....	13
Chapter Overview	16
Re-thinking the “Theory of Secularization”	19
Chapter 2: Spectacular Religion.....	21
The Artist John Martin.....	24
Belshazzar’s Feast: A Case Study.....	25
Visual Sensationalism.....	28
Art and Amusement	31
The Panorama	33
The Diorama	35
The Interplay of Spectacle and Art	36
The Expectation of “Hyper-reality”	40
The British Art World and the Works of Martin	41
British Exhibitions	45
Accessibility and Multiplicity.....	47
Unorthodox Exhibitions.....	48
Printmaking Developments.....	49
A New Mode of Picture Making.....	52
A New Artistic Strategy.....	53
Religion and Art in Britain	56
The New Spectator.....	62

Chapter 3: Allusion to Apocalypse.....	65
The Language of Apocalypse	69
The Rise of Apocalyptic Thought: Brothers, Southcott, and Irving	72
Richard Brothers	74
Joanna Southcott	76
Edward Irving	77
Why the Apocalypse Matters.....	78
The Cultural Production of Apocalypse	82
Visualizing the Apocalypse	84
Empirical Evidence.....	90
Spiritual Substantiation.....	98
Analogical Representation and Political Strategy.....	100
Pre-Millennium vs. Post-Millennium	101
John Martin and Apocalyptic Progressivism	106
Conceiving of Apocalyptic Progressivism.....	109
Deliverance or Destruction?	114
Chapter 4: The Wounded City: The Politics of Urban Destruction in John Martin’s “Mesopotamian Trilogy”.....	116
John Martin and the Decimated City	119
Martin’s Mesopotamian Trilogy.....	122
The Mystical Babylon and Modern London.....	128
The City of God	133
The City as Victim	135
The Positioning of the King.....	138
Systematic Oppression of the Poor	141
Luxury and Reform.....	145
The Synchronizing of the Spiritual and the Secular	147
The Fight to Define Luxury	150
Paganism	157
Paganism and the Spenceans	159
Countering the Paternalistic Landscape.....	165
Chapter 5: Contingent Deliverance: Three Paintings of the Exodus.....	170
The Three Exodus Paintings	174
John Martin’s <i>The Seventh Plague of Egypt</i> in Context	178
The Positive Plague: A Warning to the Nation.....	181
Moses as a Political Reformer	183

The Conjunction of God and Man in Relation to Apocalyptic Progressivism	187
The Politics of Unorthodox Exhibition.....	189
Francis Danby and David Roberts: “In the Style of Martin”	191
David Roberts <i>The Departure of the Israelites in Egypt</i> in Context.....	193
Israel as a Nation.....	195
Britain and Israel.....	198
Stone Testaments to Slavery	202
Ancient and Modern Abolition	205
Abolitionism and the Rise of Christian Socialism.....	209
The Government of God under Moses.....	212
Francis Danby’s <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> in Context.....	215
The Equitable Economics of Moses and British Reformist Politics.....	218
The Anachronistic Ark.....	221
Emotional Dissonance and Israelite Greed	223
The Flesh-Pots of Egypt.....	227
The Economics of Moses as the Foundation for Spencean Reform	230
Moses, The Jubilee Trumpet, and Land Reform.....	233
Egypt versus Israel	237
Chapter 6: Conclusion.....	241
Figures.....	259
Bibliography	327

List of Figures

- Figure 2.1. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821, Oil on Canvas, 160 x 249 cm, Private Collection.....259
- Figure 2.2. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, after 1821, Oil on canvas, 153 x 222 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, U.K. (probably a later copy done by Martin).259
- Figure 2.3. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1826, Mezzotint with etching, 54 x 72 cm, British Museum, London.260
- Figure 2.4. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1826, etching, 50 x 74 cm, British Museum, London.260
- Figure 2.5. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail from mezzotint).261
- Figure 2.6. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail from mezzotint).261
- Figure 2.7. Robert Mitchell, *Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square*, in 'Plans and Views in Perspective,' 1801.262
- Figure 2.8. Samuel Rawle and George Hunt, *The Geometrical Ascent to the Galleries, in the Colosseum, Regent's Park*, 1829, Aquatint on paper, Guildhall Library, London.263
- Figure 2.9. Anonymous, *Bird's-Eye View from the Staircase and Upper Part of the Pavillion in the Colosseum, Regent's Park*, 1829, Aquatint on Paper, Guildhall Library, London.264
- Figure 2.10. Edward Francis Burney, *The Eidophusikon*, 1782, watercolor on paper, 21 x 29 cm, British Museum, London.265
- Figure 2.11. A. Pugin and J. Morgan, *Plan and Section for Arrowsmith's Diorama Building*, London, J.D. Dingers Polytechnisches Journal, vol 17, 1825.....265

Figure 2.12.	‘Mr. Martin’s Belshazzar's Feast painted with Dioramic Effect, Advertisement,’ 1833.....	266
Figure 2.13.	Handbill Advertising <i>The Departure of the Israelites</i> Diorama, 1833. ...	266
Figure 2.14.	George Scharf, <i>The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1828</i> , watercolor, 19 x 26 cm, Museum of London.....	267
Figure 2.15.	Edward Francis Burney, <i>The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1784: The Great Room, East Wall</i> , 1784, pen and grey ink and grey wash, and watercolour, 34 x 49 cm, British Museum, London.	267
Figure 2.16.	William Angus, <i>Representations of the Exhibition of Paintings at Somerset House</i> , After Daniel Dodd, 1784, engraving.....	268
Figure 2.17.	Benjamin West, <i>Moses Receiving the Laws on Mount Sinai</i> (or <i>Moses as the First Lawgiver</i>), 1784, oil on canvas, 579 x 396 cm, London, Palace of Westminster.	268
Figure 2.18.	Pietro Antonio Martini, <i>The Salon of 1785</i> , 1785, etching, 34 x 51 cm, British Museum, London.	269
Figure 2.19.	Pietro Antonio Martini after Johann Heinrich Ramberg, <i>The Exhibition of the Royal Academy</i> , 1787, hand-coloured etching, 38 x 53 cm, British Museum, London.	269
Figure 2.20.	A. Pugin, <i>Gallery of the British Institution</i> , from ‘The Magazine of Fine Arts,’ 1821, etching, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.	270
Figure 2.21.	A. Pugin, <i>Gallery of the British Institution</i> , from ‘The Magazine of Fine Arts,’ 1821 (detail).....	270
Figure 2.22.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , after 1821, Oil on glass, Syon House, London.	271
Figure 2.23.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1821 (detail of glass version at Syon House).....	271

Figure 2.24.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , from ‘The Saturday Magazine,’ 1833, woodcut.....	272
Figure 3.1.	Benjamin West, <i>The Opening of the Four Seals, or Death on a Pale Horse</i> , 1796, Oil on canvas, 447 x 764.5 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.....	273
Figure 3.2.	J.M.W. Turner, <i>The Fifth Plague of Egypt</i> , 1800, Oil on canvas, 122 x 181 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art.	273
Figure 3.3.	James Gillray, <i>The Prophet of the Hebrews - The Prince of Peace Conducting the Jews to the Promised Land</i> , published 5 March 1795 by Hannah Humphrey, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.	274
Figure 3.4.	Joseph Mede, <i>Apocalyptick Scheme</i> from ‘Key of the Revelation,’ 1650, fold out diagram, 35 x 40 cm, British Library, London.....	275
Figure 3.5.	<i>A Chronological Chart of the Visions of Daniel and John</i> , published by Joshua V. Himes, 1842, hand-tinted lithograph, B.W. Thayer & Co., Boston.	276
Figure 3.6.	Benjamin West, <i>The Destruction of the Old Beast and the False Prophet</i> , 1804, Oil on canvas, 99 x 143 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.	277
Figure 3.7.	John Martin, <i>Diagram for Belshazzar's Feast</i> , from the pamphlet ‘A Description of the Picture Belshazzar's Feast,’ etching, British Library, London.	277
Figure 3.8.	Horace Vernet, <i>Judah and Tamar</i> , 1840, Oil on canvas, 130 x 98 cm, Wallace Collection, London.	278
Figure 3.9.	Rembrandt, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1636-8, Oil on canvas, 167 x 209 cm, National Gallery of Art, London.....	278
Figure 3.10.	Engraved by Fletcher, <i>The City of Babylon</i> , 1740, engraving, 46 x 33 cm, Private Collection.....	279

- Figure 3.11. Thomas and William Daniell, *Jagannatha Sabha*, Plate 4 from Hindoo excavations in the mountain of Ellora, near Aurungabad in the Deccan, in twenty-four views, 1803, Aquatint, British Library, London.279
- Figure 3.12. Daniells, *Dusasumade Gaut*, at Benares, on the Ganges, Part 1, Plate 16 of Oriental Scenery, 1795-97, Coloured aquatint, British Library, London.280
- Figure 3.13. John Martin, *Plan of the London Connecting Railway & Railway Transit along both Banks of the Thames*, from 'Metropolitan Improvement Plans,' 1845, 54 x 86 cm, British Library, London.280
- Figure 4.1. Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1828, Oil on canvas, 392 x 496 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.280
- Figure 4.2. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (untraced original, Oil on canvas, 213 x 340 cm)282
- Figure 4.3. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828, preliminary etching, 62 x 96 cm, British Museum, London.282
- Figure 4.4. John Martin, *The Fall of Babylon*, 1831, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (original painting, 1819, Oil on canvas, 155 x 244 cm).283
- Figure 4.5. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821, Oil on canvas, 160 x 249 cm, Private Collection.....283
- Figure 4.6. Anonymous, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1798, hand-coloured etching, 36 x 25 cm, British Museum, London.284
- Figure 4.7. James Gillray, *The Hand-Writing on the Wall*, 1803, hand coloured etching with aquatint, 26 x 36 cm, British Museum, London.....285
- Figure 4.8. Charles Williams, *The Interpretation of the Handwriting on the Wall*, 1805, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.285
- Figure 4.9. Jonathan Martin, *London's Overthrow*, 1832, Pen and ink on paper, 66 x 98 cm, Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, London.286

Figure 4.10.	John Martin, <i>Satan Viewing the Ascent into Heaven</i> , from ‘Illustrations to Paradise Lost,’ 1827, Mezzotint, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.	287
Figure 4.11.	John Martin, <i>Heaven-The Rivers of Bliss</i> , from ‘Illustrations to Paradise Lost,’ 1825, Mezzotint, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.....	288
Figure 4.12.	John Martin, <i>Heaven-Rivers of Bliss</i> , 1827 (detail).....	288
Figure 4.13.	John Martin, <i>The Celestial City and the River of Bliss</i> , 1841, Oil on canvas, 194 x 123 cm, Tate Britain, London.	289
Figure 4.14.	John Martin, <i>The Celestial City and the River of Bliss</i> , 1841 (detail). ...	289
Figure 4.15.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Nineveh</i> , 1828 (detail of mezzotint).....	290
Figure 4.16.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Nineveh</i> , 1828 (detail of mezzotint).....	290
Figure 4.17.	Washington Allston, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1843, Oil on canvas, 366 x 488 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts.	291
Figure 4.18.	after John Slack, “A representation of the Manchester reform meeting dispersed by the civil and military power, Aug 16th 1819,” 1819, wood engraving, 52 x 62, British Museum, London.	292
Figure 4.19.	John Martin, <i>The Repentance of Nineveh</i> , 1840, Oil on board, 36 x 50 cm, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle-upon Tyne.	293
Figure 4.20.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Nineveh</i> , 1828 (detail of mezzotint).....	293
Figure 4.21.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1821 (detail from mezzotint).	294
Figure 4.22.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Nineveh</i> , 1828 (detail of etching).....	295
Figure 4.23.	Robert Cruikshank, <i>The Champion of Westminster Defending the People from Ministerial Imps and Reptiles</i> , 1818, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 39 cm, British Museum, London.	296
Figure 4.24.	Robert Cruikshank, <i>The Champion of Westminster Defending the People from Ministerial Imps and Reptiles</i> , 1818 (detail).....	296

Figure 4.25.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1821 (detail of etching).....	297
Figure 4.26.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1821 (detail of glass version at Syon House).....	297
Figure 4.27.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1821 (detail of glass version at Syon House).....	298
Figure 4.28.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Babylon</i> , 1819 (detail of mezzotint).	298
Figure 4.29.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Nineveh</i> , 1828 (detail of mezzotint).....	299
Figure 4.30.	John Martin, <i>Belshazzar's Feast</i> , 1821, (detail of glass version at Syon House).....	299
Figure 4.31.	George Cruikshank, <i>A Patriot Luminary Extinguishing Noxious Gas!!!</i> , 1817, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.	300
Figure 4.32.	George Cruikshank, <i>A Patriot Luminary Extinguishing Noxious Gas!!!</i> , 1817 (detail).....	300
Figure 4.33.	A. Pugin, <i>Gallery of the British Institution</i> , from 'The Magazine of Fine Arts,' 1821, etching, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.	301
Figure 4.34.	A. Pugin, <i>Gallery of the British Institution</i> , from 'The Magazine of Fine Arts,' 1821 (detail).....	301
Figure 5.1.	J.M.W. Turner, <i>The Fifth Plague of Egypt</i> , 1800, Oil on canvas, 122 x 181 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art.	302
Figure 5.2.	John Martin, <i>The Seventh Plague of Egypt</i> , 1824, Oil on canvas, 144 x 214 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.	302
Figure 5.3.	David Roberts, <i>The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt</i> , 1829, Oil on canvas, 119 x 212 cm, City of Birmingham Art Gallery, U.K.....	303

Figure 5.4.	David Roberts, study for <i>The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt</i> , 1827, ink and watercolor on paper, 43 x 62 cm, British Museum, London.	304
Figure 5.5.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825, Oil on canvas, 149 x 240 cm, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, U.K.....	305
Figure 5.6.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825, Mezzotint, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT.....	305
Figure 5.7.	John Martin, <i>The Seventh Plague of Egypt</i> , 1823, preliminary sketch, 9 x 14 cm, Shepherd Gallery, New York.....	306
Figure 5.8.	John Martin, <i>The Seventh Plague of Egypt</i> , 1824 (detail).	306
Figure 5.9.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Babylon</i> , 1831, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (untraced original, 1819, Oil on canvas, 155 x 244 cm).	307
Figure 5.10.	John Martin, <i>The Fall of Nineveh</i> , 1828, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (untraced original, Oil on canvas, 213 x 340 cm).	307
Figure 5.11.	After David Roberts, <i>The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt</i> , from ‘The Saturday Magazine,’ 1832, woodcut.....	308
Figure 5.12.	After Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , from ‘The Saturday Magazine,’ 1833, woodcut.	309
Figure 5.13.	David Roberts, <i>The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt</i> , 1829 (detail).	309
Figure 5.14.	Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, <i>The servitude and distress of the Israelites in Egypt</i> , from ‘Die Bibel in Bildern’, 1860, Etching.....	310
Figure 5.15.	Edward John Poynter, <i>Israel in Egypt</i> , 1867, Oil on canvas, 137 x 317 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, London.....	310
Figure 5.16.	J. M. W. Turner, <i>Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying</i> , 1840, Oil on canvas, 91 x 123 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.	311

Figure 5.17.	Eduard Bendemann, <i>The Captive Jews in Exile</i> , 1832, Oil on canvas, 183 x 280 cm, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.	311
Figure 5.18.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	312
Figure 5.19.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	312
Figure 5.20.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	313
Figure 5.21.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	314
Figure 5.22.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	314
Figure 5.23.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	315
Figure 5.24.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail of mezzotint).	316
Figure 5.25.	Francis Danby, Study for <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1823, sepia wash, 25 x 34 cm, Private Collection.	317
Figure 5.26.	Poussin, <i>The Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert</i> , 1637-39, Oil on canvas, 149 x 200 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.....	318
Figure 5.27.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail).....	319
Figure 5.28.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail).....	319
Figure 5.29.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail).....	320
Figure 5.30.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail).....	320
Figure 5.31.	Francis Danby, <i>The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt</i> , 1825 (detail).....	321

Figure 6.1.	Benjamin Franklin, <i>Proposed design for the Great Seal of the United States</i> , Drawing by Benson J. Lossing for 'Harper's New Monthly Magazine,' July 1856. General Collections of the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.....	322
Figure 6.2.	Henry Cheever Pratt (formerly attributed to Thomas Cole), <i>Moses on the Mount</i> , 1828-29, Oil on canvas, 117 x 150 cm, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.	323
Figure 6.3.	John Martin, <i>Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still</i> , 1816, Oil on canvas, 150 x 231 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.	324
Figure 6.4.	John Martin, <i>Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still</i> , 1827 (detail from mezzotint).	325
Figure 6.5.	John Martin, <i>The Creation of Light</i> , from 'Illustrations to Paradise Lost,' 1825, Mezzotint, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London (Original untraced, 1825, Oil on canvas, 107 x 173 cm).....	326

Abstract

This dissertation investigates a series of large-scale apocalyptic-themed paintings produced in London during the 1820s by the artists John Martin, Francis Danby and David Roberts. Each of these artists created works that excited and amazed London audiences with their scale, perspective, and visual drama. However, they were not mere spectacles. My central contention is that many people viewed these paintings through a political framework in the 1820s and 1830s, and that the meanings generated by them were aligned with the rhetoric and policies of those in favor of political reform. Rather than interpreting these paintings as bleak predictions of a violent future, I believe they should be viewed as mechanisms of political motivation. Painting the destruction of ancient cities was designed to motivate viewers to want to avoid such destruction in the future. During this era Britain was commonly described as either modern Babylon or modern Israel and these works suggested that the collective salvation of Britain was contingent on political reform. The frequent employment of biblical narratives in political writings and their repeated use by several artists during a concentrated period of time provides a firm basis for positing connections between the visual and the political. In support of my argument I have analyzed the coherence between the discursive implications of these religious subjects in concert with the manner of their representation. Through the examination of an array of primary sources, including popular journals, published sermons, religious pamphlets, art criticism, and newspaper articles, I

demonstrate how these paintings could have connoted reformist political policies such the abolition of slavery, land redistribution, and other measures designed to foster economic equality and counter *laissez faire* ideology. In short, my work attempts to shed light on the connections between Christianity and progressive political ideas in the early nineteenth century and illuminate the ways in which visual media impacted these dynamic processes.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1822 the British painter J. M. W. Turner opened his first solo exhibition to public viewing. Having been one of the most successful artists in London over the course of the first two decades of the century, Turner decided to alter and enlarge his home so as to utilize a section of it as a public exhibition space. Only days before the annual Royal Academy exhibition was set to open its doors, Turner opened his to what he undoubtedly hoped would be an anxiously awaiting public. To his dismay, the solo exhibition attracted little attention from either the London public or press. One of Turner's biographers, A. J. Finberg, in his attempt to reconcile the public fame of Turner with the failure of this particular exhibition, cited the fact that the painter John Martin opened *his* solo exhibition at the exact same time, and "naturally" Martin's show would garner more public attention than Turner's.¹ Soon after this occurrence, Sir Thomas Lawrence, the esteemed President of the Royal Academy of Art, offered a toast at a dinner in the Freemasons Tavern addressed to "the most popular painter of the day, John Martin."²

¹ A. J. Finberg, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R. A.*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 274.

² Leopold Martin, "Reminiscences of John Martin," *The Newcastle Observer*, March 30 1889.

These two events paint a picture of the British art world in the early nineteenth century that complicates the conventional art historical narrative of the period, in which artists like Turner and Constable dominate the scholarly discourse. The painter and printmaker John Martin was something of an anomaly and an enigma to his contemporaries, but regardless, his works attracted some of the largest audiences of any artist during the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain. By transversing through the realms of fine art, popular spectacle, and religious sermon, John Martin discovered an artistic formula that electrified the public at the time and, when given the opportunity, continues to draw the eyes of spectators today.

The term “popular” rightly carries complex theoretical implications in relation to the art of the nineteenth century.³ In its most fundamental definition, John Martin was a “popular” artist. Edward Bulwer Lytton, in his influential *England and the English* (1833), compared Martin to Raphael and Michelangelo, calling Martin “the greatest, most lofty, the most permanent, the most original genius of his age.”⁴ *Arnold’s Magazine of the Fine Arts* stated in 1833 that, “We presume there are few readers of our magazine who are not acquainted with the name of John Martin, and to whom that name is not a word, embodying, in one conception, all that is great and glorious in art.”⁵ The journal *The Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle* referred to the public at the time as “the generation which runs with gaping wonder to gaze at [Martin’s] singular productions.”⁶

³ See Stuart Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular,” in *People’s History and Socialist Theory*, ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981) 227-40.

⁴ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 2d ed., vol. 2 (London: R. Bentley, 1833), 260.

⁵ Dec 1833, 99

⁶ “Exhibition of the Society of British Artists,” *The Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle* 76 (1829): 221.

And in an 1834 article from *The Westminster Review*, the majority of which is harshly critical of Martin, the author grudgingly conceded that

John Martin is the most universally popular painter of the day. His reputation was as rapid in its growth as it was wide in its spread. No painter ever took so sudden and violent a hold upon the fancy of the public. All at once he blazed a meteor in the world of art . . . his progress has been likened to the journey of a king or a conqueror;—one perpetual succession of shouting and homage.⁷

Though artists like Turner and Constable tend to dominate current scholarly considerations of art during the early nineteenth century in Britain, there is little doubt that, in the minds of the public during that era, it was the age of Martin.

Martin, Politics, and the Apocalypse

The early nineteenth century was an age of apocalyptic fervor, and no artist more effectively exploited that than John Martin. The onset of the French Revolution in 1789 caused many to envision themselves as actors in the end-of-the-world drama described by St. John in the Book of Revelation. There was an ominous sense that the cataclysms prophesied to precede the second coming of Christ were imminent. Virtually all of Martin's major works invoked the idea of apocalypse, even though he rarely represented the apocalypse directly. Old Testament narratives of mass destruction in ancient cities like Babylon, Nineveh, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Egypt were understood to be types for the future apocalypse, and Martin spent most of his career representing those subjects.

My dissertation aims to conceive of the political implications of representing the apocalypse during this period. By analyzing the apocalyptic works of Martin and two of

⁷ "Illustrations of the Bible by John Martin," *Westminster Review* 20, no. 40 (1834): 452-4.

his followers, Francis Danby and David Roberts, I want to explore the range of political meanings that could have been conveyed through their groundbreaking visions of the Bible. One might assume violent representations of mass destruction to be straightforward affirmations of a bleak religious outlook allied with conservative political ideologies. However, the history of the period complicates those assumptions. Martin's, and his followers', paintings were dynamic entities that could have been appropriated for a range of political purposes. As one reviewer noted in 1833, "In painting one picture [Martin] paints a thousand."⁸

I want to suggest that these works specifically engaged in promoting reformist political ideas. While a notion of apocalypse often structures the consideration of these works, the paintings also alluded to the concepts of deliverance and future millennium. Because of this, the paintings also posited a political path toward heavenly protection and the conceptual Christian utopia. Due to both the specific narratives these artists elected to paint, and the ways in which they conceived of these scenes, the works seem to suggest that protection from apocalyptic destruction hinged on a collective type of salvation produced by properly conceived social and political institutions, rather than on individual repentance or righteousness.

One thing the paintings under consideration in this study did not do was endorse the status quo. Apocalypticism was an ideology of change that focused on contemporary change and promised future change.⁹ Art historian Gail Husch's *Something Coming:*

⁸ "On the Genius of John Martin," *Arnold's Magazine of the Fine Arts*, December 1833, 101.

⁹ J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 222.

Apocalyptic Expectation and Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Painting concludes with regard to a series of apocalyptic paintings executed in America:

None of the paintings we have examined was meant to reinforce the status quo, to praise its viewers for lives well lived and responsibilities fulfilled. None of these paintings encouraged the complacent acceptance of an existing worldview. Their purpose was transformative: they were apocalyptic in function as well as subject, designed to unsettle their viewers with the vision of human inadequacy, while offering hope for a total obliteration of the old self and the emergence of a regenerated being into a regenerated world.¹⁰

Much the same can be said for the works of Martin, Danby, and Roberts, many of which provided the inspiration for the paintings Husch analyzed. The English paintings also attempted actively to provoke an emotional response in their viewers. They depicted chaos and destruction yet they also offered a pathway for navigating through the chaos. That pathway was premised on the promotion of Christian-inspired government programs aimed at countering the destructive social consequences of unfettered capitalism.

Historiography and Methodology

The connection between the political discourse on the apocalypse and apocalyptic representation in the visual arts has received much less scholarly attention than apocalyptic literature has. The most serious and broad analysis of apocalypse-inspired visual art from the period was undertaken by the literary scholar Morton Paley in his work, written with Northrop Frye, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (1986).¹¹ Paley, who has written a number of works in relation to the idea of apocalypse in the early nineteenth

¹⁰ Gail E. Husch, *Something Coming: Apocalyptic Expectation and Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Painting* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 212.

¹¹ Morton D. Paley and Northrop Frye, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

century, summarized and explicated some issues concerning apocalyptic paintings from the period. The strength of this study was also its greatest weakness: Paley took a broad and systematic approach to his subject by analyzing virtually every apocalyptic painting from the first half of the nineteenth century. The absence of previous scholarship required a broad overview of the period, yet that breadth resulted in a lack of depth when discussing specific works of art. Characteristic of his generation, Paley was also focused on ascertaining the intentions of the artists, rather than considering the reception of the works or the broader contexts generating the subjects and themes they represented. Building off Paley's useful survey, I take a more in-depth look at selected works of art from the period and investigate the meanings they could have generated at the time of their exhibition through a study of the social, political, and artistic contexts in which they were produced and received.

With regard to the study of Martin specifically, scholarly attention has been similarly sparse. As with Paley's work, most scholars have approached the artist from a comprehensive viewpoint that attempts to account for his entire life and career.¹² These studies provide a firm basis for future research, yet there remain a need for a more in-depth look at the convergence between individual artworks and their historical contexts.

¹²The first twentieth century study of Martin was done by the amateur collector Mary Lucy Pendered, *John Martin, Painter, His Life and Times* (New York: E.P. Dutton and company, 1924). Following Pendered, Thomas Balston produced two extensive and comprehensive works on Martin, Thomas Balston, *John Martin, 1789-1854, Illustrator and Pamphleteer* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1934); ———, *John Martin, 1799-1854, His Life and Works* (London: G. Duckworth, 1947); Though Balston predicted a great revival of Martin in the middle of the century, it was not until 1975 that another major work on Martin was produced by William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975); Since Feaver's book, there has been no other book-length scholarship devoted solely to Martin's works, though collector Michael Campbell has mounted a number exhibitions of Martin's prints, that have produced substantive catalogues. See Michael J. Campbell, *John Martin: Visionary Printmaker* (England: Campbell Fine Art in Association with York City Art Gallery, 1992); ———, *John Martin, 1789-1854: La Oscuridad Visible. Estampas I Dibujos De La Colección Campbell* (Madrid: Bancaja, 2006).

Too often, the artist's unusual personal biography and his possible intentions have driven scholarship on Martin and his work. While I will not discount Martin's biography or his intentions as irrelevant, I do not believe they can centrally account for an understanding of his works.

This study proposes a close examination of the historical, political, and cultural contexts in which Martin's works were engaged so as to postulate the types of ideas they could have produced. Martin's works appeared at a historical moment that is equally as fascinating as the artist's personal story and more significant for the overall analysis of the paintings. He exhibited his first major painting in the spring of 1816, less than a year after the Battle of Waterloo and the fall of Napoleon. Waterloo signified a low point for political radicalism in war-torn France, but it was in many ways a starting point for radicalism in Britain. While the French Revolution was being waged, radicalism was branded with the stigma of treason in Britain. However, following the end of the Napoleonic era, British radicalism was unleashed and the threat of violent revolution became ever-present. Full-scale revolution never erupted in Britain, but there were a series of events that most historians regard as bringing the country to the precipice of civil war: the Spa Fields riots of 1816, which aimed to overtake the Tower of London and the Bank of England; the "Peterloo Massacre" of 1819, in which government troops opened fire on a reformist protest in Manchester, resulting in the deaths of eleven individuals and the wounding of 600 more; and the Cato Street Conspiracy of 1820, in which a plan to assassinate simultaneously all of the British cabinet ministers was thwarted. Together, these events created "levels of popular unrest never to be exceeded

in the nineteenth century” in Britain.¹³ Accordingly, they also produced a precarious and dangerous political climate during the five years after Waterloo.

Following the execution of the Cato Street conspirators, British radicalism adapted to its dangerous circumstances in multiple ways. First, radicalism went largely underground, operating in more covert ways so as to avoid the consequences suffered by open protesters.¹⁴ More importantly however, radicalism began to take a more analytical approach to reform in an attempt to compete with the “scientific” basis of conservative politics.¹⁵ British economic policy during this period was heavily influenced by the emerging science of “political economy” (known today simply as economics), and one of the most well known political economists—Thomas Malthus. Rather than seeing society as progressing, Malthus described a future full of famine, disease, and plague due to the rapidly increasing population. Adherents of political economy tended to favor *laissez faire* economic policy and commonly asserted that science proved the efficacy of non-intervention in elevating the condition of the lower classes more effectively than laws aimed at accomplishing that task directly.¹⁶ And while Malthus was not a *laissez faire*

¹³ Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.

¹⁴ For instance, the famous satirist William Hone and cartoonist George Cruikshank began to publish critiques in the form of nursery rhymes as a means of avoiding being prosecuted for critiquing the government. See William Hone and George Cruikshank, *The Political House That Jack Built* (London: William Hone, 1819).

¹⁵ For an overview of this phenomenon, see Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); and David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (London: Verso, 1993), 107-20.

¹⁶ See James P. Huzel, *The Popularization of Malthus in Early Nineteenth-Century England: Martineau, Cobbett and the Pauper Press* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Anne Digby, “Malthus and the Reform of the Poor Law,” in *Malthus Past and Present*, ed. Jacques Dupaquier, Fauve-Chamoux, A., Grebenik, E. (London: Academic, 1983); Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

purist, his name became indelibly bound to the concept.¹⁷ For instance, in Thomas Carlyle's *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (1839) he bemoaned the incessant social conversation regarding "*Laissez-faire* and Malthus, Malthus and *Laissez-faire*."¹⁸

During the 1820s, the decade in which Martin's most famous works were exhibited, radicals generally opted for a new political strategy: rather than trying to incite political reformation through mass public gatherings or elaborate assassination plots, they decided to attack the underlying logic of Malthusian political economy. Violent radical tendencies morphed into what scholars have called "the age of reform." A school of thought described as "moral economy" arose in opposition to the cold-hearted "political economy" associated with Malthus. This altering of the terms of debate also allowed radicals to ally with Christian reformers who viewed Malthusianism as pernicious and in opposition to the charitable principles of their religion. As one such reformer wrote, if Malthusian political economy was in fact correct,

in committing crimes we should only be executing the will of God; in alleviating the distresses of others, in watching over the bed of sickness, in relieving the prisoner from the horrors of a gaol, in feeding the hungry, in clothing the naked, we should be running counter to all the decrees of Providence, we should be deranging the whole system of the universe, we should be increasing the evils we had in mind to destroy. If this system be true, virtue . . . is a morbid sensibility.¹⁹

Using the tools and analytical structures of traditional political economy and the moral basis of Christianity, reformers began to publish writings on the structures of a "moral

¹⁷ Almost all political economists proclaimed the need for a *laissez faire* approach to governing, yet many of them also recognized the need for some government incursion within the economic system. Malthus himself proposed instituting preventative checks on fertility among the lower classes and employing the lower classes in public works projects.

¹⁸ Thomas Carlyle, *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays; Collected and Republished, etc.* (London: James Fraser, 1839), 422.

¹⁹ Piercy Ravenstone, *A Few Doubts as to the Correctness of Some Opinions Generally Entertained on the Subjects of Population and Political Economy* (London, 1821), 19.

economy” wherein the state could have a positive role to play in relation to the individual and to social improvement.

Martin’s paintings, I believe, directly engaged these political debates. Martin painted narratives that were either associated directly with the calls for political reformation or supported the logic behind the “moral economy” that opposed the economic thought of Malthus. As alluded to before, Old Testament narratives such as the destruction of Babylon were commonly understood to be metaphors for the plight of modern London. In his representations of such scenes, Martin located the blame for the downfall of ancient societies in unrestrained wealth accumulation and the lack of properly conceived social and economic policies. At the core of virtually every major reformist platform was the rejection of a self-regulating market system, the promotion of a “moral economy” wherein labor was more than a mere commodity, and the necessity of legislative incursion to realize the moral economy. It is with this ideological position that Martin and his follower’s paintings aligned.

My dissertation also focuses on ascertaining spectator reception and my research has consequently aimed at procuring primary sources that might provide insight into the types of ideas the paintings could have suggested in spectators’ minds. My work builds on scholarship by historians of nineteenth century religion and politics such as Boyd Hilton, J. F. C. Harrison, W. H. Oliver, Gregory Claeys, Tim Fulford, and Clarke Garret.²⁰ Finding sources that shed light on religious subjects and the meanings they

²⁰ Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1988); Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*; W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978);

conveyed when referenced in society by preachers, theologians, writers, politicians, political activists, and others was a crucial part of this process. References to religious narratives in both religious and non-religious sources proved valuable. Religious tracts, pamphlets, published sermons, journals, and theological treatises that dealt either directly with the idea of apocalypse or with the specific apocalyptic Old Testament subjects the artists painted were searched out. Then, similar references in radical or reformist political journals were examined. By analyzing these sources, I have been able to postulate what types of ideas spectators brought with them to the pieces of art on display or in circulation and have then tried to connect those ideas to the paintings themselves. By closely analyzing the visual mechanisms the artists employed in the compositions—formal devices such as figural placement, style, color, perspective, scale, viewpoint, and included or excluded details—I have attempted to imagine how the works were positioned in relation to the various political interpretations of the apocalypse available to British spectators at the time of their original exhibition.

Art criticism also forms an important part of my research, though I consider it to be only one component among many in the analysis of spectator reception. Access to the thoughts of the art critics who first reviewed the work provides invaluable insights when attempting piece together the possible ideas a painting may have connoted to its original audiences. However, assuming that the published response of an art critic somehow encapsulates the way the public as a whole viewed a work of art, or that the meanings

Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millennium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987); Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

most spectators may have associated with a painting inevitably made their way into art criticism, is problematic. As art historian Adrian Rifkin has pointed out, “The study of the critical reception of a work of art as a significant element in the assigning of meaning to it is not only just one operation amongst the many that are possible, but in itself has an unstable or equivocal status.”²¹ One problem of art criticism is that it tends rely almost exclusively on “words and formulations that are already up and running: elliptical, rich in their inertia and unresponsive to the new.”²² For example, British art critics almost never discussed the political implications of a work of art unless the subject was so obviously political that the topic could not be avoided. Martin’s most famous painting, *Belshazzar’s Feast* (1821), was ostensibly about God punishing a wicked and gluttonous king, and it was painted at a time when King George IV was under heavy public scrutiny for similar offenses, yet critics never voiced the seemingly obvious parallels. Thus while the insights of art critics form a crucial component of my analysis, their silence on certain subjects, politics in particular, does not preclude the distinct possibility that many spectators viewed these works as having political meaning.

Viewing paintings of subjects seemingly devoid of political content through a distinctly political lens might seem unorthodox, but is by no means without precedent. My work attempts to parallel that of art historians such as John Barrell and Thomas Crow. Barrell, in his *The Dark Side of the Landscape: the Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840*, drew out the political resonances of pastoral subjects in late

²¹ Adrian Rifkin, “History, Time, and the Morphology of Critical Language, or Publicola’s Choice” in *Art Criticism and its Institutions in Nineteenth Century France*, ed. Michael R. Orwicz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 30.

²² Ibid.

eighteenth-century British painting.²³ In a similar manner, Crow analyzed depictions of classical subjects in the late eighteenth century French art and argued for their contemporary political significance in his *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France*.²⁴ My research employs a similar strategy and aim. The political implications of religious subjects have not received as much attention in art historical scholarship on the period as neo-classical or landscape subjects have, yet the centrality of religion to British culture at the time suggests that such investigation might yield significant results. None of the paintings under examination here are overtly political, yet I believe that their political implications ought to be regarded as key components of their analysis.

The Politics of Early Nineteenth-Century Religious Art

Outside of a few select artists such as William Blake and J. M. W. Turner, early nineteenth-century British religious art has received scant attention from scholars.²⁵ This has resulted partially from an academic distaste for exploring reactionary politics during an era of revolutions.²⁶ The assumed connection between religion and reactionary

²³ John Barrell, *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge [Eng]: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

²⁴ Thomas Crow, *Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

²⁵ Blake and Turner's paintings of religious subjects factor stylistically into the modernist discourse and are therefore more palatable to many scholars. Frequently, the religious content of their work is either minimized, explained away, or separated from the religious context of the time. For example, see Christopher Burdon, *The Apocalypse in England: Revelation Unravelling, 1700-1834*, Studies in Literature and Religion (St. Martin's Press, 1997), 21. Burdon sets up a hierarchy between artists like West and Martin, whom he derogatorily claims "saw their art as a kind of Christian Evangelism." In contrast, he asserts that Blake and Turner deserve art historical attention because their religious art is "less explicit and doctrinal." For Burdon, Martin's religion was "literalistic" while Turner's was "visionary."

²⁶ One of the reasons Blake's paintings of religious subjects have received scholarly attention is because of Blake's well known radical political opinions. Though complex and convoluted, Blake's political opinions clearly challenged the status quo. For various interpretations of Blake's connection with radical politics,

politics stems somewhat from contemporary political preoccupations, but it is also rooted in historical scholarship. In 1906 the historian Élie Halévy published *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century—England in 1815*. In it he argued that Britain avoided revolution during the nineteenth century, in contrast to every other European country, because of the politically pacifying influence of Methodism.²⁷ This came to be known as the “Halévy Thesis.” It positioned British religion firmly in the camp of political conservatism by arguing that Christianity and capitalism acted as a unified ideological system. The “Halévy thesis” began to be contested in the 1970s when E.P. Thompson sided with Halévy’s conclusions and Eric Hobsbawm defied them. Since then virtually every scholar of British religion in the nineteenth century has taken a side, but the majority have come to reject the “Halévy thesis.”²⁸

One of the fundamental problems with a cultural category as broad as “religion” is that it can hardly be said to be uniform in any respect, particularly in a country as divided along religious lines as Britain. The gap between the established Anglican church and the dissenting sects during this period was so substantial that a unified political ideology for religious groups simply could not have existed. The vehemency with which French radicalism denounced the Catholic church during the French

see David Vorse Erdman, *Blake: Prophet against Empire. A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); E. P. Thompson, *Witness against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Michael Ferber, *The Social Vision of William Blake* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985); Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); David Worrall and S. H. Clark, *Blake, Nation and Empire* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Julia M. Wright, *Blake, Nationalism, and the Politics of Alienation* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004); Robert Rix, *William Blake and the Cultures of Radical Christianity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Sarah Haggarty and Jon Mee, *Blake and Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

²⁷ Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century --England in 1815* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1924).

²⁸ Rohan McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England*, Historical Connections (London: Routledge, 1998), 64.

Revolution was matched in England by the religious dissenters, many of whom openly attacked the Anglican church.²⁹ Dissenting churches often positioned themselves in direct opposition to the established church rather than as some sort of congenial offshoot. As one author has written, “Because the politics of Methodism evolved in a religious culture dominated by the established church, religious deviants seem politically dangerous because its very existence interfered with the capacity of the church to function effectively.”³⁰ Most historians now concur that religion was not bound to conservative politics and even underpinned the rise of political radicalism.³¹ In 1811, when introducing a bill in Parliament designed to check the spread of Methodist preachers, a proponent of the legislation curtly stated that “to be a Methodist is to be a Jacobin in the extreme.”³² In an era when the threat of revolution was tangibly felt, Methodism and other non-conformist religions were believed to be breeding grounds for radical thought.

Adding to the complexity is the fact that the line between religion and irreligion in the early nineteenth century was by no means clear. Radical journals published articles that cited Christianity as the reason for reform, immediately followed by articles that

²⁹ In the past thirty years a number of scholars have posited British religious cohesion as key to either its political continuity or its national identity. Key among these works, J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1688-1832: Ideology, Social Structure, and Political Practice During the Ancien Regime*, Cambridge Studies in the History and Theory of Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). However, recently scholars have begun to push back against this notion of religious cohesion, asserting that the animosity between dissenting religious groups and the established church ensured that protestant identity was contested ground. See Jeremy Black, “Confessional State or Elect Nation? Religion and Identity in Eighteenth Century Britain,” in *Protestantism and National Identity: Britain and Ireland, C. 1650-1850*, ed. Tony Clayton and Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁰ Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault, *The Industrial Revolution and British Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 86.

³¹ McWilliam, *Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century England*, 64.

³² “Correspondences (Dissenting Ministers),” in *Addington papers* (Exeter: Devon County Record Office, 8 June 1811).

referred to religion as a mere delusion.³³ The malleability of interpreting the Bible, combined with the complexity of nonconformist religion, meant that religion could be employed for political goals on either end of the spectrum. Regardless of the political affiliations of the “religious right” in contemporary America today or scholars’ personal feelings toward religion, it is important to attempt to conceive of the complex intersections of religion and politics in the nineteenth century when seeking for the original meanings associated with the works.

Chapter Overview

I begin my dissertation by exploring the visual context of the early nineteenth century in Britain in order to conceive of Martin’s immense popularity. The public’s obsession with Martin’s works resulted from a combination of the subjects he painted, the dramatic ways he painted them, and the unique place his art occupied within British visual culture. The period witnessed an explosion of new technologies that produced sensational visual amusements such as the panorama and diorama. Martin’s works possessed an affinity with these large-scale spectacles; exploring that relationship is crucial for conceiving of spectator reception. The popularity of Martin also represents a key shift in the history of British art. Martin invented an artistic strategy that freed him from the market forces that dictated the production of most British art of the period. Based on new methods of exhibition and distribution, Martin focused solely on making paintings that attracted, shocked, amazed, and inspired the public. This artistic strategy not only created a new type of art, but ushered in a new type of audience as well.

³³ For instance, see *The Medusa*, 24 April 1819, 130.

Integration of these new spectators into the equation is another crucial aspect of my analysis.

Because Martin and his followers' works were so closely bound to the idea of apocalypse, the next chapter examines the early nineteenth-century belief in the apocalypse and its political ramifications. Though these artists rarely represented the actual apocalypse, they each painted subjects analogically related to the apocalypse. The emphasis on cataclysm and destruction in their Old Testament paintings only heightened the connection between their works and the future apocalypse. I attempt to complicate the traditional categories that have structured an understanding of the apocalypse and argue for a type of belief that harmonized apocalyptic expectation with progressive politics. Through an in-depth look at the discursive possibilities of apocalyptic representation in the nineteenth century, the possible political associations of Martin's and his followers' works will hopefully become clarified.

In the fourth chapter I focus on three of Martin's paintings premised on the concept of urban destruction. In *The Fall of Babylon* (1819), *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821), and *The Fall of Nineveh* (1828), Martin painted not only the downfall of these ancient biblical cities, but also indicated the reasons for their downfall. The works suggested that these cities were destroyed by God because of broadly conceived social degradation rather than individual unrighteousness. More specifically, they revealed an unhealthy and futile obsession with wealth and opulence. These three works each position the king as the sole individual with the capacity to alter the course of society and possibly avoid destruction. The tension between social degradation and the culpable king implied the necessity of legislative means in aligning these ancient societies with the will of God.

When considered in relation to the political debates of the time, which pitted *laissez faire* capitalism against an interventionist state, the meanings produced by these three paintings tended to cohere with the ideological arguments made by proponents of political reform.

Martin became known as a painter of destruction, but it is important to note that he and his followers also painted scenes of deliverance. The fifth chapter deals with a series of paintings done between 1824 and 1829 by Martin, Francis Danby, and David Roberts. During this period, each artist exhibited works on the subject of the Israelite exodus from Egypt. Martin's *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (1824), Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* (1825), and Roberts's *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* (1829) each presented different moments from the exodus story, yet they shared the politically charged figure of Moses. Moses was commonly referred to as "The Great Legislator," and thus mention of him was nearly always politicized. In radical publications of the 1820s, Moses was lauded as the prototypical reformer who freed slaves, legislated to protect the poor from oppression, and instituted an economic system premised on the notion of equality. By making Moses the focus of their paintings and alluding to the legislative dimension of the prophet, these artists created works that supported the version of Moses described by political reformers. In addition, the representation of ancient Israel, a nation collectively chosen to receive God's protection, alluded to Britain's possible role as the modern-day chosen nation that would be delivered from apocalyptic catastrophe.

Re-thinking the “Theory of Secularization”

There exists an academic tendency to see post-enlightenment manifestations of religion as nothing more than persistent traces of primitive social life that will inevitably pass away over time. Though the modern “theory of secularization” has been largely discredited by the ongoing presence of religion in contemporary culture and international conflict, it still structures many assumptions regarding the place of religion in the nineteenth century.³⁴ Yet in the minds of most early nineteenth-century spectators, Babylon was believed to have actually been destroyed by the hand of God and the Red Sea to have literally been divided by the rod of Moses. Paintings that pictured and shaped these beliefs offer us a way into the perceived realities of the period. If reform is to be fully understood, religion, in its many manifestations, has to be recognized as a part of that discourse. As Robert Abzug has justly observed in relation to early nineteenth-century American reformist efforts:

We can only understand reformers if we try to comprehend the sacred significance they bestowed upon these worldly arenas. For even as some of

³⁴ For an outline and summary of the “theory of secularization” see Sally M. Promey, “The ‘Return’ Of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art,” *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 3 (2003). In short, stemming from the Enlightenment critique of religion, thinkers like Auguste Comte, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx created a paradigm in which modernism necessarily would lead to the decline and eventual demise of religion in society. According to this theory, societies grow like human beings and pass through several phases of evolution. In this construction, religion is merely a trace of primitive social life that would disappear as the society matures into modern adulthood. So from this perspective the notion of “modern religion” is oxymoronic. It is necessary to distinguish between secularization—which is an actual historical process whereby secular spheres became differentiated from religious institutions—from the “theory of secularization.” It is “the conflation of the process of secularization and modernization with their imagined consequences for religion” that defines the “theory of secularization.”³⁴ The phenomenon of secularization is undeniable, the theory however is not only debatable, it has proved to be a false construction in the modern world. Secularization has not resulted in the demise of religion, but rather the two have provided “a kind of mutual license for each other.” While the American experience reveals this phenomenon to a greater degree than the European, where religion has declined at a sharper degree, the ultimate demise does not appear to be imminent; more importantly though in the context of this dissertation, it certainly was not the case in the early nineteenth-century in Britain.

today's scholars glean mostly secular significance from religion, the antebellum reformers saw mainly transcendent meanings in politics, society, and the economy. We must concentrate on the religious imaginations of reformers in order to grasp the essential nature of reform.³⁵

Abzug's conclusion applies equally as well to the British context where religious discourses were actively involved in justifying reformist political efforts. Despite modern skepticism, it is important to take religious sentiment seriously in order to attain a more complete understanding of the past.

I have little interest in making claims regarding Martin's rightful place in the canon of art history or in the aesthetic merits of Martin's paintings. My work stems most precisely from the field of visual culture. I am not simply trying to explain the paintings, but to come to a greater understanding of "the world that create[d] them and that they help[d] create."³⁶ Martin's and his followers' works are especially worthy objects of study in this regard. Because of their popular appeal, their broad circulation throughout British society, and their use of subjects invested with sacred and secular meanings, they are precisely the types of works that demand further analysis using the methodological tools of cultural studies. Though some might consider them to be little more than imaginative fantasies of far off places and eras that were painted to satiate the tastes of an uncultured public, John Martin, Francis Danby, and David Roberts' works were beloved in their time and were taken seriously by a range of viewers. They thus offer a way into nineteenth century historical "reality" by way of popular "religious imagination."³⁷

³⁵ Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), vii-viii.

³⁶ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), 30.

³⁷ Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination*, viii.

Chapter 2

Spectacular Religion

During the decades of the 1820s and 1830s John Martin was commonly called “the most universally popular painter of the day.”¹ The public praise heaped upon Martin amassed throughout his life, and most commentators believed his position in the annals of art history to be secure. In the early years of Martin’s career, for example, one reviewer wrote, “on him the patronage of the powerful and the rich is beaming, while the public in general encouraged him with their eagerness to view his exhibitions, and the justice of this united patronage, due to transcendent talents, will be confirmed and eulogized by posterity.”² Martin’s popularity was significant enough to warrant a following by other artists who painted in what came to be known as “the style of Martin,” including Francis Danby and David Roberts. Following Martin’s death in 1854, *The Illustrated London News* declared, “John Martin was in every respect a great and an original artist. His honorable hereafter is secure in the annals of English art. No man is safer.”³ This opinion seemed confirmed in 1854 by the reception of Martin’s final trilogy of apocalyptic themed paintings (*The Great Day of His Wrath*, *The Last Judgment*, and *The Plains of Heaven*) which successfully toured Britain and the United States for three years after his death.

¹ “Illustrations of the Bible by John Martin,” *Westminster Review* 20, no. 40 (1834): 452.

² “Memoir of John Martin,” *European Magazine and London Review* 83, no. September (1822): 195.

³ “Town and Table Talk on Literature, Art, Etc.,” *The Illustrated London News* 24, no. 670 (1854): 163.

Yet *The London Review* and *The Illustrated London News* writers could not have been more wrong in their assessment of Martin's posthumous reputation. Martin's meteoric ascendance in the British art world was equaled by his rapid descent into obscurity before the end of the nineteenth century. At the 1887 Jubilee Exhibition in London, which was designed to celebrate the greatest British artists of the century, no works by Martin were included. The artist still had some public support though. Ford Maddox Brown wrote an editorial protesting the exclusion of certain master painters from the exhibition, particularly John Martin whose name was "known all over the civilized world."⁴ By 1935, however, few defending voices remained. The trilogy of large-scale paintings that had been so popular after Martin's death, and been valued in 1855 at over 8000 pounds, were sold together at auction in 1935 for a mere seven pounds. In a final act of humiliation, the buyer tore one of the paintings into three sections and turned them into a fire screen.⁵

The reasons for the drop in Martin's critical fortunes are varied and many. Martin never acquired a literary patron such as Ruskin, who vehemently defended the work of Turner.⁶ Martin's unique style of painting did not withstand the shifting aesthetic tastes of the nineteenth century and, after falling out of favor, many works were rolled up and put in storage. Most significantly, the neglect of Martin's works stemmed from the interpretation of nineteenth-century art that became dominant by the end of the century discounted the types of works he made: his work fell outside the parameters of the

⁴ Ford Maddox Brown, "The Progress of English Art Not Shown at the Manchester Exhibition," *The Magazine of Art*, no. January (1888): 122.

⁵ William Feaver, ed. *John Martin 1789-1854: Artist, Reformer, Engineer* (Newcastle: Laing Art Gallery, 1970), 3.

⁶ Ruskin's first volume of *Modern Painters* unequivocally sets up Turner as the greatest modern artist. John Ruskin, *Modern Painters: Their Superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to All the Ancient Masters Proved by Examples of the True, the Beautiful, and the Intellectual from the Works of Modern Artists, Especially from Those of J. M. W. Turner Esq., R.A.*, vol. 1-2 (London: Smith, Edler, & Co., 1843).

modernist art historical canon that was in the process of formation. By the end of the century, Martin's paintings seemed almost antithetical to the dominant paradigm of modernism that structured nineteenth-century art. They did not seem to fit into the discourse of formal innovation and abstraction, or of realist subject matter and subject-less painting, that became characteristic of modernist art.⁷ His preference for religious subject matter in particular put him at odds with modernism's predilection for secular subjects. Ironically, the popularity Martin generated among the general public during his lifetime provided proof of his artistic deficiencies for later generations. As the divide between *avant garde* artistic productions and mainstream, popular, and officially supported artistic works became entrenched at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, Martin's paintings were relegated to the realm of kitsch.

I aim here to analyze why these works were so intensely popular in their day and, rather than viewing their popularity as a strike against them, understand how such popularity might factor into an analysis of the art. The desire to see and possess Martin's paintings in the nineteenth century stemmed from both internal and external factors. His works were beloved by audiences because of what he painted, how he painted it, and how those paintings related to other works of art and commercial entertainments produced in Britain at the time. Martin's art was not only popular among the art-going public but transcended traditional social boundaries and reached into sectors of the public that had limited engagement with fine art. This social reach is a crucial factor when analyzing the meanings generated by Martin's works at the time of their original exhibition and

⁷ Religion was not entirely absent from modernist painting, as *avant garde* artists such as Manet, Van Gogh, and Matisse each employed religious subjects at times. But these works are a small minority in the overall output of artists who are included in the modernist canon, and they are often treated as anomalies because of their religious nature.

distribution in the form of prints. As the creation of meaning results from an individual's encounter with an image, as mediated by cultural and social preconceptions and expectations, the range of possible meanings is likely to expand as the work's reach extends beyond the conventional boundaries of art.

The popularity of Martin's works also speaks to broader issues regarding the nature of art's situation in British culture. Martin not only created a new style of painting but also produced and distributed his work in new ways. The popularity of his works signifies a paradigmatic shift among artists towards new modes of picture-making. Rather than being confined to the realm of fine art, these works stood at the crux of what would be more properly termed visual culture. The popularity of his work offers evidence of and insight into this crucial aspect of nineteenth-century art, in which amateur artists and professional craftsman created new types of art and engaged new types of audiences.

The Artist John Martin

Martin was an unorthodox artist in numerous ways. Born in Northumberland in July 1789, during the same week in which the Bastille was stormed in Paris, he spent his childhood in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. At the age of eighteen he moved to London to work as a china and glass painter. Though not formally trained as an academic artist, he began making large history paintings, usually dominated by landscapes, and submitted them for display at the Royal Academy exhibitions. His first painting was exhibited in 1812, and soon thereafter, he began garnering popular and critical praise. The most successful of Martin's works were based on Old Testament narratives, often containing moments of

dramatic heavenly intervention, large scale urban destruction, and spectacularly painted architectural forms. His career was marked by an antagonistic relationship with the Royal Academy of Art, which caused him often to exhibit his paintings in competing exhibitions or in one-man shows. During the height of his fame in the 1820s he began a career as a printmaker as well, producing original mezzotints for illustrated editions of both *Paradise Lost* and the Bible. Martin's commercial successes led a number of other artists, most notably Francis Danby and David Roberts, to begin painting in what became known as "the style of Martin."

After amassing a small fortune during the period of his greatest popularity in the 1820s, Martin devoted the next decade of his life almost entirely to urban improvement projects. He produced designs and pamphlets for numerous proposals, including an underground railway, sewage systems designed to clean the Thames, and a mechanism for purifying the air in coal mines. None of these projects were adopted during Martin's lifetime and his personal investment in them virtually bankrupted him. During the final fifteen years of his life he returned to painting biblical subjects, including the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, a trilogy of paintings related to Noah and the flood, and his final trilogy of paintings representing the apocalyptic destruction of the world, the last judgment, and a landscape of heaven. John Martin died in 1854 on the Isle of Man just after finishing the final trilogy of paintings.

Belshazzar's Feast: A Case Study

The most frequently repeated story about the artist John Martin concerns the exhibition of his painting *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821) and the unprecedented crowds that

flocked to view it (Figures 2.1-4).⁸ Martin had risen to fame with the exhibition of *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still* (1816) and *The Fall of Babylon* (1819). By the time he placed *Belshazzar's Feast* before the public in 1821, they had been primed for another masterpiece by Martin. Before completing the work, he declared that his painting would “make more noise than any picture [had] before.”⁹ Martin submitted *Belshazzar's Feast* to the British Institution's art exhibition in 1821. The painting quickly became the highlight of the show: every major London newspaper focused on it in its review and the Institution immediately awarded Martin £200 for the “extraordinary talent” displayed in the picture.¹⁰ The painting was immediately purchased for £840, a substantial sum given that the next highest price paid for a work in the exhibition was £150.¹¹

Belshazzar's Feast became a star attraction in London. The *Literary Gazette* described the scene in the art gallery as follows:

The crowd of persons, who, like bees upon the fresh blossoms of honeysuckle and roses, flutter constantly, humming and buzzing before this extraordinary work of the mind and of the pencil, proves indisputably the great benefit which it will procure to this laudable establishment, by alluring daily to the place an increase of visitors, who pay their humble shilling below in the ‘infancy of happy ignorance,’ and do not grudge it after they have ascended the noble steps which lead to this National Chromatic Parnassus.¹²

⁸ I have included three different version of the painting. Figure 1 is thought to be the original work, however it is in a private collection and is rarely shown in public or reproduced. Therefore, it is difficult to get a high quality image and high quality details of. Figure 2 is a later copy done by Martin that now resides in Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Figure 3 is a large mezzotint produced by Martin in 1826. Figure 4 is an etching done by Martin that is included simply because it is easier to see some details in the simplified line composition.

⁹ Mary Lucy Pendered, *John Martin, Painter, His Life and Times* (New York: E.P. Dutton and company, 1924), 103.

¹⁰ Thomas Smith, *Recollections of the British Institution, for Promoting the Fine Arts in the United Kingdom* (London: Simpkin & Marshall and Edward Stanford, 1860), 80.

¹¹ “Transactions Relating to the Fine Arts: British Gallery List of Pictures Sold at the Exhibition, 1821”, *The Magazine of the Fine Arts; and Monthly Review of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture* 1, no. 2 (1821): 151-2.

¹² “Belshazzar's Feast,” *The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, etc.*, Saturday, March 10 1821, 154.

As this reviewer noted, Martin's work single-handedly drew crowds of excited visitors to the British Institution exhibition. More than 33,000 people visited the exhibition in 1821 compared with 12,000 in the previous year and 14,000 in the following year. Martin's picture nearly tripled the number of spectators who normally attended the exhibition.¹³ The painting drew such large crowds that the Institution erected a barrier around it for protection. The popularity of the painting prompted the Institution to keep the exhibition open an extra two weeks; then, because the final days were so crowded, the extension continued for an additional week. On the final day of the show, the *British Press* reported that "the admirers of *Belshazzar's Feast* were more numerous than on any preceding day."¹⁴ Not only were the crowds large and raucous, but they increased over time as word of it spread throughout the city.

Available data suggests that more people saw this painting than any other work during the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain.¹⁵ 70,000 people saw *Belshazzar's Feast* in 1821 when it was in London.¹⁶ For comparison, 31,000 spectators attended the 1814 exhibition of a painting done by the best-known British artist of the period, Benjamin West; approximately 40,000 people paid to see Géricault's famous *Raft of the Medusa* when it came to London in 1820.¹⁷ To fully appreciate the number of spectators who saw *Belshazzar's Feast*, it is also necessary to consider the tens of thousands who saw the composition in the form of a print as well as those who saw a

¹³ Robin Hamlyn, *John Martin 1789-1854: Belshazzar's Feast, 1820* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1989), 23 note 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ For a summary of the data see Ibid.

¹⁶ The European Magazine reported in 1822 that 50,000 people paid to see *Belshazzar's Feast* during its time in the shop on the Strand. Robin Hamlyn has estimated that roughly 20,000 people would have seen it at the British Institution. See "Memoir of John Martin," 197.

¹⁷ Rupert Christianson, *The Victorian Visitors: Culture Shock in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2000), 39.

version of the painting in its later incarnation as a commercial diorama. It is likely that the total tally would register in the hundreds of thousands. These numbers call for an explanation as to why this work of Martin's, along with the rest of his oeuvre, were so immensely popular with audiences of the time. I believe the answer stems from four key components: the visual sensationalism of the compositions; the uniqueness of their place in the British art world; their accessibility through a variety of venues and media; and their religious subject matter.

Visual Sensationalism

Belshazzar's Feast is visually spectacular in the most dynamic sense of the word. The depicted subject was a private spectacle painted in such a way that the painting itself became a public spectacle. Drawn from the Old Testament book of Daniel, the painting depicts the great feast held by the wicked king Belshazzar the night before the destruction of Babylon. Martin represented the moment when the hand of God writes in blazing light a series of seemingly unintelligible words. The enslaved prophet Daniel has been summoned to interpret the writing and stands in the middle foreground of the painting, informing Belshazzar of God's ominous message: "Thou art weighed in the balances, and thou art found wanting."¹⁸ This miraculous moment of divine intervention and prophetic interpretation forms the core of the narrative action, but it is only one of the visual components of the work that compete for the viewer's attention.

Martin organized the composition around an immense open-air palace. This allowed him to depict the confluence of an enthralling architectural interior, the majesty of the city buildings that lay outside the palace walls, and the presence of God in the form

¹⁸ Daniel 5:27

of clouds and lightning crashing down upon these man-made structures. His use of a deep perspective space heightened the visual sensations of the painting. Martin claimed that a viewer could see a mile deep into the recesses of Belshazzar's palace.¹⁹ The viewer is positioned slightly above the action, hovering as it were in a god-like position, looking down onto the unfolding chaos below. The foreground figures, consisting of Daniel, a cowering Belshazzar, and a crowd of advisors and wives, enact the basic narrative of the scene (Figure 2.5). But beyond the elevated foreground, Martin painted thousands of minute figures feasting at tables, sacrificing to pagan Gods, and reacting in horror to the heavenly manifestation (Figure 2.6). Decorations premised largely on actual architectural remnants of ancient Egypt, Babylon, and India cover the architecture.²⁰ In the background and outside the palace, a convoluted vortex of clouds and lightning appear to be on the verge of consuming the giant stepped tower of Babel. One reviewer described the scene as "a poetical and sublime conception." He continued, "The writing in letters of living light, and the architecture, and the supernatural glare which dims the effulgence of the heavenly moon, are all in the grandest style of art. It is, perhaps, their extraordinary affect which causes us to think the human scene unworthy of them."²¹

Martin's picture is a visual feast for the eyes. It pulls the viewer's eye in and out, to the left and the right. Every inch of the large canvas vies for the spectator's attention. Newspaper reviewers in London emphasized the dramatic ways the painting "electrified" audiences who saw it, often noting the "astonishment and awe" it engendered.²² A reviewer from *The Examiner*, apparently still reeling from having seen it in person,

¹⁹ **NEED TO FIND ORIGINAL SOURCE

²⁰ John Martin, "A Description of the Picture Belshazzar's Feast Painted by Mr. J. Martin Which Gained the Highest Premium at the British Institution," (London: J. Robins and Co. Albion Press, 1825), 8.

²¹ "The British Gallery," *The Literary Gazette*, January 27 1821, 60.

²² "British Institution," *The Sun*, January 27 1821.

professed that it had such a powerful visual affect that “the recollection of it even can never be erased.”²³ A reviewer from the *British Press* gave up attempting to capture the visual impact in words—simply stating that it was “almost impossible to describe in language.”²⁴

Even artists and critics normally hostile to Martin were struck by the painting and the public response to it. Charles Leslie wrote that *Belshazzar’s Feast* “made more noise among the mass of people than any picture that has been exhibited since I have been here.”²⁵ David Wilkie wrote “the picture is a phenomenon . . . Common observers seem very much struck with this picture; indeed, more than they are in general with any picture.”²⁶ In 1833 a reviewer said of Martin’s works, probably with *Belshazzar’s Feast* in mind:

His pencil and his brush appear dipped in the colours of fire; and whether the scene represented be of Earth, of Heaven, or of Hell, the same supernatural and magnificent effect is thrown over the whole. His cities, his towers, his walls, and his palaces, are of such wide extent, such height and breadth, that the spectator who gazes on them, for the first time, involuntarily calls up and associates them in his mind with the splendid imagery of some Arabian tale, or with the dreams he has dreamed of Memphis, Tyre, and Thebes of old. The boundaries of space, extent, and dominion, which have been assigned to the usual rules of art, have been broken down by John Martin, and wide as his pencil has traversed the canvas, new forms and new creations, of supernatural glory and beauty, have sprung up beneath it, until the whole canvas has glowed with the lightning of some mighty and magnificent creation.²⁷

In the mind of this reviewer, the “supernatural” subjects Martin painted were matched by his equally “supernatural” methods of painting, with “the colours of fire” that broke down

²³ “The British Institution,” *The Examiner*, February 4 1821.

²⁴ “The British Institution,” *The British Press*, Tuesday, January 30 1821.

²⁵ Jared Bradley Flagg, *The Life and Letters of Washington Allston* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1892), 170.

²⁶ Allan Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie; with His Journals, Tours, and Critical Remarks on Works of Art; and a Selection from His Correspondence*, vol. 2 (London: J. Murray, 1843), 56.

²⁷ “On the Genius of John Martin,” *Arnold’s Magazine of the Fine Arts*, December 1833, 99.

“the boundaries of space, extent, and dominion.” Significantly, the reviewer also described the way Martin’s works took agency away from the spectator and forced him or her “involuntarily” to recall the imagined glory of ancient cities, quite independent of the particular subject depicted. While art critics and artists continued to debate the merits of Martin's work, it was difficult to deny the public’s fascination with its dramatic conception of pictorial space and the ways in which the artist seemed to bring the biblical narrative to life.

Art and Amusement

Part of the visual appeal and emotional power of Martin’s scenes stemmed from their appropriation of techniques employed in popular amusements. Martin was essentially a self-taught artist. Trained as a glass painter, Martin decided to try his luck at fine art. His lack of formal training posed a number of challenges for him, but it also liberated him from the stylistic conventions of traditional academic painting. For inspiration, Martin looked back to artists like Poussin who had become famous for creating landscape-dominated narrative compositions. He also looked outside his window at the numerous visual amusements that had recently fascinated the London public. The early nineteenth century witnessed an explosion of popular visual amusements that, in concert with various forms of exhibition and printmaking, formed a vibrant and complex visual culture. Martin’s infusion of stylistic traits from popular visual amusements was one facet of his works’ visual sensationalism and one reason they became so wildly popular with London audiences.

The two types of amusements most closely related to Martin's paintings were the panorama and the diorama. In fact, the most infamous incarnation of *Belshazzar's Feast* was a version of the painting not produced by Martin's hand. Copyright restrictions were vague and unenforced at the time, so following the phenomenal success of Martin's painting, businessman Hippolyte Sebron set out to make a large scale diorama of *Belshazzar's Feast*. Executed on more than 2,000 square feet of canvas, the overwhelming affect of Martin's original painting was amplified to an even greater extreme. Sebron advertised the spectacle as "Mr Martin's Grand Picture of Belshazzar's Feast painted with Dioramic Effects . . . Five times as large as the late Mr. B. West's celebrated picture of Death on a Pale Horse . . . [occupying] in magnitude the space of Four Dioramic Views."²⁸ Although Martin attempted unsuccessfully to sue Sebron, the diorama opened in London in 1833 and traveled to the United States in 1835, where it was installed in both New York and Boston.

The size and style of Martin's canvases caused people to correlate them with visual amusements, even when that translation was not as direct as Sebron's diorama. The relationship between fine art and popular spectacle shifted during the century, and the association of Martin's paintings with those spectacles is crucial for understanding the meanings generated by the works. His paintings negotiated territory that existed across the domains of fine art and visual amusement, and emphasized the points of overlap and intersection between them. Martin's works created bridges between the multiple spaces of visual reception in British society, and they were paths trod by thousands of new

²⁸ Handbill advertising "Mr. Martin's Grand Picture of Belshazzar's Feast Painted with Dioramic Effect at Queens Bazaar, Oxford Street," in *Maylebone Collection* (London: Westminster Public Libraries, 1833).

spectators. Exploring this relationship provides insight into how Martin's works broke down traditional barriers between fine art and popular visual culture.

The Panorama

In the early nineteenth century, the interplay between fine art and commercial spectacle did not involve the distinct boundaries that currently bracket our conceptions of them. Visually based entertainments, commonly called "spectacles" by their contemporaries, existed in a tenuous relationship to the world of fine art, each altering and being altered by the other. Precisely how this engagement changed art production in Britain is still a matter of debate and analysis, yet there is consensus on one thing: such "spectacles" fundamentally altered the nature of spectatorship in the early nineteenth century.²⁹

On March 14, 1789, Robert Barker, an Irish artist who had spent time working in England, opened to the public something he called "Mr. Barker's Interesting and Novel View of the City and Castle of Edinburgh, and the Adjacent and Surrounding Country."³⁰ Spectators entered through a darkened central cylinder and upon exiting it were confronted by a massive painted canvas that surrounded them on all sides (Figure 2.7). A few years later the term "panorama" was coined for Baker's invention. The success of Baker's early panorama prompted him to build a permanent structure in Leicester Square

²⁹ The central work in this field is Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990); more recent works that broach the subject include Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860*, 1st ed. (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave, 2001); and William H. Galperin, *The Return of the Visible in British Romanticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993). For a historiographical summary of the issue, see Laurie Garrison, "The Visual Subject, Circa 1810-1840: Trends in Romanticism and Victorianism," *Literature Compass* 4, no. 4 (2007), 1078-91.

³⁰ For an detailed discussion of the history of the panorama, see Richard Daniel Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1978), 128-210.

in 1794 for showing other scenes. The Leicester Square panorama remained in operation for seventy years, a period which saw numerous panoramas flourish across Europe and America. By 1795 there was a panorama in New York; by 1800, they had been built in Paris and many German cities.

From the outset it was clear that panoramas intended to create a type of visual sensation that approximated perceived reality as closely as possible. To that end, owners often added themed environments from which to view the canvas. Ocean-based panoramas might include viewing platforms that looked like the deck of a frigate, complete with buckets, spools of rope, and other accoutrements found aboard the deck of an actual ship. This simulation was so convincing that some spectators were reported to have complained of feeling seasick after leaving the structure.³¹

Perhaps the most effectively conceived and constructed panorama was the Regents Park Colloseum, a massive building that dominated the North London skyline during the nineteenth century. While other panoramas rotated their subjects periodically, the Colloseum showed one subject, a view of London from the top of St. Paul's Cathedral. The man behind the project lived for months in the lantern of St. Paul's while he made drawings for the painting. The final canvas was sixty feet high and 130 feet in diameter, with the painted surface covering more than 24,000 square feet. The cylindrical canvas also connected to a painted dome that added 15,000 square feet, totaling more than 40,000 square feet of painted canvas. The painting was only part of the illusion, however. In the center of the large dome a viewing platform was constructed

³¹ Ann Bermingham, "Landscape-O-Rama: The Exhibition Landscape at Somerset House and the Rise of Popular Landscape Entertainments," in *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, ed. David H. Solkin (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery by Yale University Press, 2001), 130.

that architecturally mirrored the top of St. Paul's to the very last detail (Figures 2.8-9). Spectators entered through a darkened tunnel and emerged from an elevator onto the platform of pseudo-St. Paul's; they could even use telescopes that had been fastened to the railing to gaze into what seemed like greater distances. The Colloseum opened in 1829 to great success. From most accounts, the Colloseum panorama achieved a level of hyper-reality that attracted crowds to the site until the 1860s, when slumping tickets sales lead to its sale and eventual destruction.³²

The Diorama

Robert Barker patented his panoramic invention in 1787 and within a short period of time, a number of competing inventions were devised that created similar sensations of "reality." Chief among these was the diorama. The diorama was a special effects arena that generated sensations of depth and presence as well as employing large-scale canvases. It was loosely based on the artist Philippe De Loutherbourg's invention of the "eidophusikon," which had been popularized in the late eighteenth century. The eidophusikon was a small theatre where viewers witnessed a series of scenes created by transparent colored glass, lighting effects, a series of screens, smoke, music, and other sound effects (Figure 2.10). Gainsborough frequented the eidophusikon and was so influenced by its effects that he used similar mechanisms for exhibiting of his paintings.³³

The diorama was an extension of the eidophusikon and enhanced many of its

³² For detailed accounts regarding the Regents Park Colloseum, see Ralph Hyde and Barbican Art Gallery., *Panoromania!: The Art and Entertainment of The "All-Embracing" View* (London: Trefoil in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1988), 79-95; Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 132-41.

³³ For details on Gainsborough see Ann Bermingham, *Sensation & Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art; Yale University Press, 2005).

mechanisms. For example, the diorama employed a rotating theatre that facilitated a greater variety of views and visual effects (Figure 2.11). Scenes were painted on both sides of a transparency so light could shine through from a variety of angles. These transparent paintings were then overlaid at various intervals with a series of opaque or transparent screens. Through a complex system of pulleys and lighting effects, the picture would transform before the eyes of the spectator, often creating the illusion of time passing during the course of a day or simulating various weather effects. Invented by Louis Daguerre, who later invented the daguerreotype, the diorama enjoyed substantial commercial success among audiences in early nineteenth century Europe. Following his profitable opening in Paris, Daguerre opened a diorama in Regents Park, London, in 1822, just months after Martin's exhibition of *Belshazzar's Feast*. Numerous other dioramas opened around London and they became, along with the panoramas, one of the most popular forms of entertainment during the era.

The Interplay of Spectacle and Art

How these spectacles affected the art created during this period is a question that many scholars have broached.³⁴ The affinity of scale between the panorama and large landscape paintings by artists such as Turner and Martin was unmistakable. What T.S.R. Boase has termed "the cult of immensity" allowed artists to compete both with panoramas and the works of art on exhibition walls.³⁵ A number of scholars have suggested that the massive landscapes on view in the panoramas and dioramas enhanced

³⁴ See Bermingham, "Landscape-O-Rama: The Exhibition Landscape at Somerset House and the Rise of Popular Landscape Entertainments"; Scott B. Wilcox, "Unlimiting the Bounds of Painting," in *Panoromania!: The Art and Entertainment of The "All-Embracing" View*, ed. Ralph Hyde (London: Trefoil in association with Barbican Art Gallery, 1988).

³⁵ T. S. R. Boase, *English Art 1800-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 21.

the taste for landscape painting during the period and more significantly perhaps, the way in which they were painted. As Ann Bermingham has noted, artists such as Constable, Turner, and Martin “shared an abiding interest in and sensitivity to the visual affect of size, colour and light, as well as the emotional and narrative possibilities of the depiction of natural phenomenon.”³⁶ She further observed,

Such painters may well have been inspired by these popular spectacles to pursue their own formal innovations . . . the advent of popular landscape spectacles were indicative of a visual culture that had come to value and expect unusual and dramatic optical effects in its painted representations of landscape.³⁷

Bermingham provided a cogent analysis of the stylistic affects of the panorama and diorama that were incorporated into works of fine art that lacked such “special” components. Scott Wilcox has also noted that

to receptive artists, the unselective nature of a 360° painted view may have encouraged greater compositional freedom. The diorama’s emphasis on changing effects of light mirrored that concern with capturing the evanescent effects of light and atmosphere which was at the heart of so much of the century’s art.³⁸

One could go a step further and see in the diorama a forerunner of the Impressionist obsession with alterations of time and weather and their impact on landscape.

With specific regard to Martin and his followers, their works employed a number of features popularized in the realm of amusement. Aside from the sheer scale of the paintings which invariably connected them to visual amusements, Martin’s compositions almost always contained deep landscape vistas intermingled with large numbers of tiny figures designed to infuse a narrative into the scene. Yet Martin balanced his deep perspective and complex scenes with a significant degree of tactility. Objects and people,

³⁶ Bermingham, “Landscape-O-Rama: The Exhibition Landscape at Somerset House and the Rise of Popular Landscape Entertainments,” 134.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Wilcox, “Unlimiting the Bounds of Painting,” 29.

no matter how small, were painted with great attention to detail. Popular amusements like the panorama and diorama had been employing similar artistic mechanisms in the decades preceding Martin. These spectacles were invariably landscape-based compositions with an emphasis on the illusion of extreme depth. When they introduced narratives, as in panoramas depicting battles, the addition of numerous small-scale figures drove the narrative. And like the works of Martin, the financial success of these popular amusements hinged on a delicate balance between perspectival depth that amazed viewers and extreme attention to detail that caused people to want to keep looking for long periods of time.

Martin also employed some of the exhibitionary tactics common in the realm of amusement. It is not coincidental that the location for Martin's first one-man exhibition was William Bullock's Egyptian Hall where before being treated to the ancient biblical landscapes, viewer would pass through the gates of a faux-Egyptian temple. When Martin had complete control over the conditions in which his works were exhibited, he would use dramatic spot-lighting techniques designed to enhance the drama. To simulate a sensation of movement within the painting, these spot-lights would even move across the canvas while viewers gazed at it. Though the lighting techniques used in dioramas were more complex, they aimed to accomplish similar ends. The public popularity of "the style of Martin" stemmed partially from the shared features of scale, compositional structure, and exhibitionary context that the public had come to love in the spaces of popular visual amusement.

Conversely, paintings could be said to have impacted the way panoramas and dioramas were constructed and presented as well. As mentioned earlier, Martin's

Belshazzar's Feast and David Roberts's *The Delivery of the Israelites from Egypt* were translated into massive dioramas without the permission of the artists (Figures 2.12-13). Beyond such literal translations, commentators often remarked on panoramas' imitation of artists such as Martin. One reviewer criticized a panorama depicting *Harlequin and Little Red Riding Hood* for its plagiarism of Martin's style.³⁹ A Miltonic version of *Pandemonium* was turned into a panorama in 1829 and the *Athenaeum* noted that it was "a picture of the capital of Satan, somewhat in the style of Martin."⁴⁰ Scholars have also identified several scenes from a panorama of *A Pilgrim's Progress* as stemming directly from compositions by Martin.⁴¹ In short, panoramas and large-scale paintings by artists like Martin existed in a complimentary relationship to one another and they exchanged artistic techniques and mechanisms of display

How did this conjunction of art and spectacle alter spectatorship? In his book on *Victorian Painting*, art historian Lionel Lambourne has boldly claimed that "the Panorama shows of the nineteenth century affected universal visual perceptions almost as radically as the television screen changed the way we look at the world in the twentieth century."⁴² Despite the fact that, as Richard Altick has noted, any conclusions on this point would be "highly speculative," a few observations might be ventured as to how viewing the panorama and the diorama may have altered the way individuals would have seen large-scale paintings by Martin, Danby, and Roberts.⁴³

³⁹ Edward Ziter, *The Orient on the Victorian Stage* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 37.

⁴⁰ *The Athenaeum*, March 16 1829, 289.

⁴¹ Tom Hardiman, "The Panorama's Progress: The History of Kyle & Dallas's Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress," in *The Grand Moving Panorama of Pilgrim's Progress*, (Montclair, NJ: Montclair Art Museum, 1999).

⁴² Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 151.

⁴³ Altick, *The Shows of London*, 195.

The Expectation of “Hyper-reality”

Panoramas and dioramas both altered the relation of representation to what the perception of “reality” was understood to be by engendering a new sense of what we might call “hyper-reality.” These spectacles aimed to transport viewers to far-off locales and fool them into thinking they were participating in an experience that transcended the physical confines of the theatre in which they were physically located. William Wordsworth penned a poem entitled *The Panorama*, wherein he described the sensation of being in one as “the absolute presence of reality.”⁴⁴ By both approximating the scale of the panorama and utilizing the effects of the diorama, Martin’s works also attempted to meet spectators’ expectations of the type of reality that such pictorial representations could convey. Martin’s works tapped into a sensation of reality that had been fostered by popular amusement in a concrete way. Gillen Wood, a scholar of English literature and culture, has written that “the cult of immensity in British history painting, from Copley to Haydon, involved not an open-ended trajectory toward spectacular vastness per se, where bigger was necessarily better, but toward life-size, or the illusion of natural size.”⁴⁵ Wood noted that the core of Charles Lamb’s harsh critique of Martin’s *Belshazzar’s Feast* was its representation of “all that [was] optically possible to be seen.”⁴⁶ This estimation of Martin’s art as creating the sense of an all-encompassing view echoes descriptions of the affects generated by panoramas and dioramas.

Whether produced by panoramas, dioramas, or monumental paintings, the affects of an all-encompassing view on spectators merits consideration. Nicholas Mirzoeff has

⁴⁴ William Wordsworth, “The Panorama,” in *The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind; an Autobiographical Poem* (London: E. Moxon, 1805), Seventh Book, line 249.

⁴⁵ Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860*, 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

asserted that the panorama was “designed to transport—rather than confine—the spectator subject . . . these devices produced a spatial and temporal mobility—if only a ‘virtual’ one.”⁴⁷ It was relatively common for spectators to describe the panorama as transporting them to distant places. Following Martin’s death in 1854, a critic for *The Illustrated London News* wrote that his paintings “carr[ied] you into the scene—by making you not only a spectator, but a living participant in what is before you.”⁴⁸ It is very possible that these types of reactions were predicated on the affinity of monumental landscape paintings with popular spectacles and on the discourse of hyper-reality that constituted the commentary on such spectacles. The rhetoric of “transporting” that popular spectacles fostered was mirrored by the idea of “carrying” the spectator into the scene in Martin’s paintings. The expectations and sensations created by the panorama and diorama surely carried over into the exhibition halls where viewers were confronted with massive landscapes and similarly felt themselves to be transported to far off, yet seemingly real, places. To understand the popularity of Martin’s works, we must consider the visual sensationalism of the paintings and the affect it might have conceivably had on viewers conditioned by popular spectacles.

The British Art World and the Works of Martin

The popularity of Martin’s works depended in part on their contrast with the types of paintings that surrounded them in art exhibitions. The structure of British art world in the early nineteenth century encouraged formulaic artistic creations, and part of the success of Martin’s works stemmed from the contrast between these formulaic works and

⁴⁷ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Visual Culture Reader* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 399.

⁴⁸ “Town and Table Talk on Literature, Art, Etc.,” 163.

his unique visions. Martin's status was rarely challenged because few artists conformed to his style of painting or choice of subjects. Several factors discouraged the production of large-scale history and devotional paintings in Britain, as is well known to scholars of British art. A brief overview of the major institutions involved in supporting art may enlighten others on the unique ways that Martin's works contrasted with the works exhibited alongside them and help account for the rarity of his painting style.

In surveys of nineteenth-century art, particularly in use in the American academy, French art of the nineteenth century is often elevated above the art of Britain. During the period however, British painters hardly felt inferior to their French counterparts. Well-known British artists such as Henry Fuseli, J. M. W. Turner, and David Wilkie routinely scoffed at and mocked French art and artists, including the most prominent among them such as Jacques-Louis David.⁴⁹ Yet even those hostile to French art tended to acknowledge that there were significant differences between French and British painting at the time. French artists were known for their superior drawing ability, a fact that even the openly spiteful Fuseli conceded.⁵⁰ French artists also possessed a higher degree of social status than their British analogues.⁵¹ Finally, as art historian Edward Morris has written, French artists' "superiority in large pretentious canvases and murals representing high art could not be denied."⁵² These three intertwined facets of French artistic life culminated in the production of large-scale history painting there to a degree unmatched in Britain. British artists like James Barry and Benjamin Haydon painted large-scale

⁴⁹ See Edward Morris, *French Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 14, 280. Morris cites when Turner visited the Paris Salon in 1802 and considered all the works to be "very low." In that same year Fuseli also visited the Salon and referred to French painting as "in a road which does not lead to anything." Morris also recounts Wilkie's negative reaction to David's *Sabine Women* in 1814.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2, 14, 26, 280.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

history paintings and attempted to fashion a tradition that could rival the genre in France, though they met with little success during their lifetimes. The Royal Academy of Art expelled Barry, who died penniless, and Haydon tragically took his life following the failure his one-man exhibition.⁵³

These gaps between British and French painting were attributable to their differing systems of patronage, tutelage, and exhibition. Major institutions such as the government and the church were much less engaged in artistic patronage in Britain than in France. The tangential association between the king and the Royal Academy of Art stemmed from British restraints on monarchical power and purse. The result was that the king rarely commissioned works of art for himself or the state.⁵⁴ In an 1836 interview published by the *American Railroad Journal*, when asked about the difference between French and British painting, John Martin stated that the basic difference between them was that the French government patronized artists.⁵⁵ To this lack of royal patronage in Britain was added the lack of church patronage. Owing to Protestant theological principles conceived during the sixteenth-century reformation, devotional subjects in churches were almost non-existent. The absence of these two major institutional patrons had significant consequences for living British artists: it meant that survival depended on

⁵³ Barry died penniless because his earnings never materialized. His most substantial work of art, and probably the most significant series of history paintings done in Britain during the eighteenth century, the cycle of paintings in the Great Room of the Royal Society of Arts, *The Progress of Human Knowledge*, was painted on an agreement that the Society would pay him only enough to cover the costs of his paints, canvas, and models.

⁵⁴ Martin Myrone, "The Sublime as Spectacle: The Transformation of Ideal Art at Somerset House," in *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, ed. David Solkin (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery by Yale University Press, 2001), 78.

⁵⁵ "Mr. John Martin Examined," *American Railroad Journal and Advocate of Internal Improvements* V, no. 1 (1836): 7.

selling and receiving commissions from members of the public, which introduced strong incentives for artists to cater to popular taste.⁵⁶

The commercial and patronage demands artists faced altered the nature of artistic training in Britain. Though Royal Academy professors like Joshua Reynolds opined on the ideal goals to which art should aspire, he spent most of his career painting portraits and adapting them to the “Grand Manner.”⁵⁷ In 1836, a parliamentary committee attempting to determine the best ways to extend the knowledge of art to all levels of society summoned John Martin to testify. In his testimony, Martin stated that “so long as portrait painting is patronized as ‘the only true history,’ so long must historic painting be dead as an art, for artists must paint to live, and it is too much to expect anyone to die a martyr to his love of any peculiar branch.”⁵⁸ One art critic called portraiture the “overwhelming invader” that “intrudes on every side” of Royal Academy art exhibitions.⁵⁹ Foreigners who visited the Royal Academy exhibition routinely remarked on the excessive number of portraits that lined the walls.⁶⁰ A watercolor depicting the exhibition of 1828 shows a gallery in which canvases seem simply to mirror the crowds

⁵⁶ While paintings created by famous artists were still too expensive for members of the average public to purchase, and would have only been bought by the very wealthy in society, a positive public response inevitably drove up the asking price for a work of art. So even though the masses were not doing the buying, their opinions still provided financial incentives for artists.

⁵⁷ Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975). For more information on the subject, see Edgar Wind, *Hume and the Heroic portrait: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Imagery*, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986)

⁵⁸ “Report of the Select Committee Appointed to Inquire into the Best Means of Extending Knowledge of the Arts, and of the Principles of Design among the People (Especially the Manufacturing Population) of the Country; Also to Inquire into the Constitution, Management, and Effects of Institutions Connected with the Arts.,” in *Session 1836*, ed. House of Commons (London 1836), ix, Part ii of Minutes of Evidence, para. 837.

⁵⁹ *Annals of the Fine Arts* I (1817): 52.

⁶⁰ Marcia Pointon, “Portrait! Portrait! Portrait!!!,” in *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, ed. David Solkin (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery by Yale University Press, 2001), 94.

below them (Figure 2.14). As Marcia Pointon has noted, “portraiture was the Royal Academy’s source of sustenance and its pervasive poison.”⁶¹

British Exhibitions

These various factors made British exhibitions somewhat different from their French counterparts. Though exhibitions at times revolved around large-scale religious and historical works by painters like Benjamin West, they were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of smaller portraits, landscapes, and genre paintings (Figures 2.15-17). As a result, many viewed British art exhibitions as fundamentally commercial ventures that lacked the social status of their French counterparts.⁶² In 1822 the *Literary Gazette* referred to the Royal Academy exhibition as a “great mart of genius.”⁶³ Art historian David Solkin has echoed this sentiment, stating that British “exhibitions were - all denials to the contrary - a doubly commercial enterprise, operating as both a highly profitable spectacle and a marketplace for expensive luxury goods.”⁶⁴ Thomas Crow has pointed out that the same could be said of the Parisian exhibitions, yet the degree to which commerce shaped British exhibitions was even more significant.⁶⁵ For instance, when comparing images of exhibition halls from Paris and London in the 1780s, the entire top row of the Salon is dominated by history paintings whereas in the Royal Academy only a central work on each wall falls into the category of history painting (Figures 2.18-19).

⁶¹ Ibid., 93.

⁶² Morris, *French Art in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 2.

⁶³ *Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles and Lettres*, no. 277 (1822): 296.

⁶⁴ David H. Solkin, *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836* (New Haven, Conn.: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and the Courtauld Institute Gallery by Yale University Press, 2001), 8.

⁶⁵ Thomas E. Crow, *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 14-19.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the commercial character of the Royal Academy exhibitions, the number of works on display continued to grow. At the inaugural exhibition in 1768, 100 artists contributed 228 works; by 1823, 548 artists contributed 1091 works.⁶⁶ Crowds attending the exhibition likewise increased dramatically during its first sixty years.⁶⁷ The public desire for exhibitions spawned numerous other ventures designed to display art. Rival institutions formed to compete directly with the Royal Academy, chief among them the British Institution. Certain social elites who felt that the Royal Academy had failed in its mission to produce art that elevated the national character formed the British Institution in 1805. The Institution held an annual exhibition featuring works by living British artists and eventually added an exhibition of works by Old Masters as well.⁶⁸ The expanding number of venues in which to display contemporary art was one of the factors that allowed an untrained artist like Martin to enter the sphere of fine art.

Understanding the forces that shaped the British art world and the types of works produced there during the early nineteenth century is important in understanding the popularity of paintings done in Martin's style. The exhibition of *Belshazzar's Feast* created such a public sensation that the *Magazine of the Fine Arts* published an etching showing the room in which the painting hung in the British Institution (Figures 2.20-21).⁶⁹ *Belshazzar's Feast* can be seen on the right-hand side of the etching, hung prominently "on the line," the best position a painting could obtain. Amid a sea of small

⁶⁶ Richard Redgrave and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School; with Critical Notices of Their Works, and an Account of the Progress of Art in England*, 2 vols. (London 1866), 574-5.

⁶⁷ Solkin, *Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780-1836*, 5.

⁶⁸ Brandon Taylor, *Art for the Nation: Exhibitions and the London Public, 1747-2001*, The Barber Institute's Critical Perspectives in Art History (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 30.

⁶⁹ *The Magazine of the Fine Arts* 1821.

portraits, landscapes, and genre scenes, Martin's large-scale work would inevitably have caught viewers' eyes. The demands of the art market, the lack of church and state patronage, and the limited scope of formal art training ensured that few artists would dare spend months or years painting large, complex works. Yet those factors also ensured that if an artist chose to pursue such a course, he or she would inevitably garner public attention and often public acclaim. Competition among large history or religious paintings was virtually nonexistent on exhibition walls, so large numbers of spectators were drawn to the few that were there. An artist who created such works risked financial failure because the works often went unsold, but if that artist could find new ways to capitalize on their popularity, painting large-scale works could prove to be economically feasible.

Accessibility and Multiplicity

The exhibition of *Belshazzar's Feast* at the British Institution exhibition in 1821 was only the start of the painting's journey. The work was in such high demand that even its purchase proved contentious. The Marquis of Buckingham offered Martin 1000 guineas for the work, but Martin had already agreed to sell it for 800 guineas to his previous employer William Collins.⁷⁰ No doubt feeling indebted to Collins, Martin honored the deal and turned down the Marquis' more generous offer. Collins was not an art collector but an entrepreneur. His interest in the painting stemmed primarily from the public reaction to it and he purchased it with the intention of profiting from its display.

⁷⁰ Guineas were equivalent to one pound plus one shilling, therefore the amount paid for the painting was £1050. Paying in the guinea was considered more gentlemanly than the pound, therefore it was often used to pay artists.

After the painting's run in the official exhibition, Collins put it on display in a room on the Strand alongside Martin's earlier *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still* (1816), and charged one shilling for admission to see the two works. As a means of advertisement, Collins paid Martin to make a smaller copy of *Belshazzar's Feast* on glass that he placed in the shop window with a light behind so that it glowed through the window as people walked by (Figure 2.22).⁷¹ This effect both advertised the painting and animated the subject, particularly its depiction of the finger of God writing in blazing light on a wall (Figure 2.23). As Samuel Redgrave noted regarding the canvas, "the light was really transmitted through the terrible handwriting;" the back-lit glass version would have only heightened such a sensation.⁷² The glass copy undoubtedly had an impact since more than 50,000 people paid the shilling to see Martin's works in Collins' shop.⁷³ After this display the painting was sent to Liverpool for exhibition at the Royal Academy and the Lyceum for almost five months. In Liverpool, the painting was shown during special evenings when it was lit by a gas light.⁷⁴ The painting then toured the nation, stopping in cities such as Bath and Cheltenham before concluding in Bristol in 1825. After four years of continuous exhibition, *Belshazzar's Feast* was finally removed from public display.

Unorthodox Exhibitions

Martin benefitted from and expanded on trends toward exhibiting art in new and diverse ways. The commercial orientation of the contemporary British art world caused

⁷¹ This might be the glass version of the painting currently located at Syon House in London.

⁷² Redgrave and Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School; with Critical Notices of Their Works, and an Account of the Progress of Art in England*, 396.

⁷³ "Memoir of John Martin," 197.

⁷⁴ *Liverpool Mercury*, Friday, November 10 1821.

numerous artists and institutions to break out of the confines of official exhibition spaces during the early nineteenth century. One-man shows, themed commercial exhibitions, touring collections, and displays of single works were all risky ventures, and many of them failed financially. However, the unprecedented crowds clamoring to view Martin's art allowed him to take those risks and to reap the financial rewards from them.

In 1775, the painter Nathaniel Hone mounted what may have been the first one-man exhibition of art in British history.⁷⁵ Soon after Hone, Thomas Gainsborough exhibited twenty-five of his paintings in a Pall Mall house in 1784. James Barry, Benjamin West, George Morland, William Blake, Benjamin Haydon, J. M. W. Turner and John Martin each held similar one-man shows during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Martin, in fact, held multiple one-man shows during the 1820s, both to unveil new works and profit from mini-retrospectives of his work, which were often located in well-known places such as Bullock's Egyptian Hall. These types of exhibitions isolated an artist's works from the hundreds of other paintings competing with them in the annual exhibitions of fine art and they allowed artists control over the physical circumstances displaying their works. Some of these one-man shows employed special lighting techniques, darkened rooms, and transparencies to enhance the affect of the works on show. Though the Royal Academy exhibition formed the centerpiece of the London art scene, it was hardly the only venue for viewing art.

Printmaking Developments

Following *Belshazzar's Feast's* initial four-year exposure, the painting continued to hold a place in British visual culture through alternative media. Not only was the

⁷⁵ Altick, *The Shows of London*, 104.

painting turned into an immense diorama, but it also was also reduced and reproduced as a mezzotint, an engraving, and a woodcut. Martin himself produced a series of self-composed mezzotints after the painting: a large-scale version that he marketed directly to subscribers and several smaller versions that he sold through print shops. Martin also produced an illustrated Bible during the 1830s that included a mezzotint of *Belshazzar's Feast*. The printing plates were sold both during and after his lifetime, and the painting continued to appear in numerous illustrated Bibles over the course of the nineteenth century. Its reproduction as a mezzotint was only part of the story. The 1820s witnessed a number of new technological developments that altered the profitability of printmaking along with its capabilities of distribution, and Martin was at the forefront of implementing them.

Reproductive engravings had supplemented artists' income for centuries and it was an increasingly important part of the British art world by the early nineteenth century. Yet engraving had some inherent limitations as well, chief among them the copper plates used in the reproductive process. Copper was a desirable metal for engraving due to its soft properties, yet those properties hindered its economic viability because the plate quickly wore down after a minimal number of runs through a press. Copper plates were even less sustainable when producing high-quality mezzotints, which were much more visually engaging than regular line engravings due to their ability to produce shades of grey. Mezzotints required special tools that created thousands of tiny holes in the plate that could be then smoothed over to different degrees to produce a wide range of tones. However, copper plate mezzotints wore down almost completely after a few hundred prints were pulled. Because of the time and skill required to create such

plates, and the relatively small number of impressions they produced, mezzotints were luxury items. This changed with the introduction of the steel plate mezzotint.

In the early 1820s, a new method for hardening steel plates after engraving them made it possible to create high quality mezzotints in exponentially greater numbers. In contrast to the 200 impressions produced from a copper plate, steel plate mezzotints produced roughly 2500 quality prints. In a few short years, print prices dropped almost tenfold because of this technological development. The first few hundred impressions pulled would generally sell for around 10 guineas, but the majority of the prints sold for as little as a few guineas apiece.⁷⁶ Martin taught himself the technique of the mezzotint and unusually took over the authorship of his prints, even though most artists hired professional printmakers to do such work. This allowed him to control the quality of his prints, cut out the intermediary, and increase his profits from their sale. He became such a skilled printmaker that American businessman Septimus Prowett commissioned Martin to do a mezzotint-illustrated version of Milton's *Paradise Lost* in the mid-1820s. The edition was extremely successful, and there are reports of Martin's prints being so plentiful in London that they sold for as low as one guinea apiece.⁷⁷ As James Twitchell has written, "printmaking had become so inexpensive that every farmer's son could have his own Sistine Madonna, or better yet, one of John Martin's mezzotints in the parlor."⁷⁸

⁷⁶ For a thorough look at the steel plate mezzotint and its impact, see Carol Wax, *The Mezzotint: History and Technique* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1990), 97-130.

⁷⁷ For details on the editions see Michael J. Campbell, *John Martin: Visionary Printmaker* (England: Campbell Fine Art in Association with York City Art Gallery, 1992), 39-40; William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 84.

⁷⁸ James B. Twitchell, *Romantic Horizons: Aspects of the Sublime in English Poetry and Painting, 1770-1850* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983), 110.

During the era, prints by Martin “found their way into . . . respectable households by the thousand.”⁷⁹

A New Mode of Picture Making

I have said little so far as to why the popularity of an artist such as Martin matters. The fact that Martin’s works drew so many people to view them suggests that they resonated with central cultural concerns of their day. Those concerns differ from the ones that have traditionally structured an understanding of the art world at the time. Martin’s works existed outside the traditional boundaries of fine art and they present us with a new sense of the kind of work that visual imagery performed in that society.

The story behind the exhibition of *Belshazzar’s Feast* provides crucial insight in this regard because it reveals the formation of a modern context for art wherein the hybridity and multiplicity of the work become central factors of its impact. The image was seen by viewers in exhibition halls, on street corners, through glowing glass, at night by torchlight, in print form, and as a massive diorama. The exposure of *Belshazzar’s Feast* via these various means was unprecedented in the early nineteenth century. In our current image-saturated information age, such a multiplicity of formats and avenues of distribution is hardly unique. And while many of the techniques Martin used to exhibit, market, and distribute *Belshazzar’s Feast* pre-dated his painting, he united these previously disparate strategies and expanded on them in new ways. In this respect, his career signified a shift toward an engagement with varied forms of image production and

⁷⁹Martin Meisel, *Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth-Century England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 168-9.

a more expansive art world that extended beyond the traditional emphasis on fine art and annual exhibitions. He produced fine art, yet his work requires us to conceive a broader context for art that more aptly fits under the rubric of visual culture.

Martin's fearless exploration of new terrains for art and artists stemmed partially from his outsider status. He always believed that his artisan background engendered a bias against him from members of the Royal Academy. Throughout his life, he pointed to an instance in 1815 when he had submitted a canvas for the Royal Academy exhibition and a can of varnish spilt down the center of it prior to the show opening, which he believed had been done intentionally, as the moment when he decided he wanted nothing more to do with the institution. But his antipathy for the Royal Academy and its apparent antipathy for him was surely fed by the fact that his untrained hand produced works beloved by the public. Not only did his works look like popular visual amusements, he was just the kind of working-class painter employed to create those amusements. Martin would probably have failed as an artist had he tried to make paintings that looked like the majority of the paintings hanging in the Royal Academy or the British Institution, so he astutely decided to do something different.

A New Artistic Strategy

In many ways, Martin's works fused the styles of the two painters who many consider to be the greatest masters of the age—Benjamin West and J. M. W. Turner. Martin took up the popular biblical narratives commonly painted by West and merged them with the dramatic landscape effects of Turner. Martin lacked the professional training and status of these artists, and more important, their financial security. He had to

generate income in order to survive as an artist, and this situation forced him to develop a new approach toward the profession.

Following the exhibition of his first few paintings, Martin seems to have recognized the possibility for an alternative strategy for generating profit. His first paintings drew audiences and received critical praise, yet the pictures were difficult to sell due to their large size.⁸⁰ Most British artists made paintings that were relatively modest in size, had simple subjects, and employed traditional academic artistic techniques so as to be both appealing and affordable to both aristocratic and middle-class audiences. As art historian Nicholas Tromans has pointed out, “a spectacular painting which drew the crowds was less rather than more likely to sell to the modest patron wishing to decorate his drawing room.”⁸¹ Exceptions to this rule existed, notably works by Turner; but generally speaking, the commercial character of the British art world and the rising status of a growing middle class meant much of the art produced took on a modest size, pleasant style, and subdued tone.

Martin recognized that he could manipulate his popularity to produce economic gain *eventually*, even if it did not yield profit immediately. Rather than relying exclusively on the sale of his paintings, as most artists did, he came to recognize that he only needed to create a stir with his large paintings. Money could be made later through personal exhibitions, where admission was charged for entry, and through the marketing of large quantities of prints. He was by no means the first artist to profit from

⁸⁰ Some of his large works eventually sold, but many remained in Martin’s possession throughout his life.

⁸¹ Nicholas Tromans, “Museum or Market?: The British Institution,” in *Governing Cultures: Art Institutions in Victorian London*, ed. Paul Barlow and Colin Trodd (Hants, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 47.

printmaking and non-traditional forms of exhibitions, but he relied on these sources to such a degree that selling his actual paintings became beside the point.

The economic exploitation of public popularity meant that new formats, styles, and subjects could be aimed toward the single goal of enhancing acclaim. Factors that had traditionally hindered painters in Britain were now turned toward the artist's advantage. Large canvases attracted viewers and dominated exhibition halls, and complex compositions involving broad landscapes and numerous figures seemed to have a hypnotic effect on the public. Martin designed his works to provoke emotional responses rather than to soothe consciences. To survive as an artist, Martin's works needed ideally to create visceral emotional reactions in his audience that were powerful enough to set off word-of-mouth campaigns and warrant minor expenditures from large numbers of people. The paintings were out of reach for most buyers of art, yet in print form, they were remarkably accessible for personal viewing and ownership.

To summarize, the broad reach that Martin's paintings had through various exhibition formats and media accounts for an important part of their popularity. In addition, the sensational visual quality of his works, their appropriation of the stylistic traits of popular amusements, and the contrast between them and the run-of-the-mill works on exhibition in London also helps explain much of their public appeal and acclaim. The most significant factor in their popularity, however, stemmed, I believe, from Martin's decision to paint religious subjects.

Religion and Art in Britain

Religious narratives were not commonly represented by artists in Britain. This might seem to contradict the proposition that Martin's choice of religious subjects contributed to his popularity, for if religious subjects ensured success, why wouldn't more artists would have painted them? Yet, as mentioned earlier, Britain's Protestant history discouraged devotional subjects within churches. However, there remained an expectation that religious art should be grandiose and fit for hallowed locations. Religious themes may have attracted viewers at exhibitions, but selling such works often proved difficult. So despite the popularity of religious themes, most artists avoided such subjects. Yet due to Martin's new strategy for generating profit, he was not only freed to paint religious-themed paintings, but religion became a crucial ally in his attempts to attract viewers.

One advantage that religious subjects had over other literary and historical subjects was the currency of the biblical stories among the British populace. Despite the general trend toward secularization that took place during the nineteenth century, religion remained a crucial part of British culture. The Bible was one of the few books commonly found in British homes. Historian J. F. C. Harrison has written with regard to the period from 1790 to 1850 that "at the popular level heaven and the angels remained just above the sky, thunder was the voice of God, and Satan could be encountered in darkness and storm."⁸² Religious subjects benefitted from a high degree of familiarity and interest on the part of the British populace, especially compared with other historical narratives and

⁸² J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 41.

mythological themes.⁸³ This level of familiarity provided a basis for public popularity, especially among the new class of people attending art exhibitions. Whereas they were unlikely to be familiar with Prometheus or Pandora, they probably knew well the story of Noah's ark or the parting of the Red Sea.

Paintings with religious themes also filled a void in British religious culture. Though some sects were more lenient than others regarding devotional imagery, most churches did not actively commission art works to decorate buildings. By no means did this preclude people from desiring religious imagery; it simply meant they sought it out through secular venues. As commentary from the time makes clear, many people viewed Martin's works as having a spiritual power that transcended their artistic beauty and visual sensationalism. The radical engraver William Sharp, perhaps the most famous printmaker of the day, requested personally to engrave *Belshazzar's Feast* because he believed that the painting was "a divine work—an emanation from the Almighty." He continued, "My belief further is, that while I am engaged on so divine a work, I shall never die."⁸⁴ Sharp's belief in the power of Martin's painting is an example of *acheiropoiesis*, a phenomenon whereby the authority of an image is believed to stem from God as the source of the image. According to this belief, the artist is merely a conduit for the powers of heaven.⁸⁵ Sharp's faith in the magical power of the commission may have been exceptional, but his assertion that the painting was a divine work that possessed some spiritual power appears to have been common. John Ruskin, in his influential *The Stones of Venice* (1851), asserted that Martin was one of the painters that "have had, and

⁸³ Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 68.

⁸⁴ Peter Cunningham, "English Engravers," *The Builder* (1863): 616.

⁸⁵ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), 13.

still have, the most influence, such as it is, on the ordinary Protestant Christian mind.” He continued, “a black cloud with a flash of lightning in it of Martin’s rarely fails of being verily, often deeply, felt for the time.”⁸⁶ Martin seemed to be unique in Ruskin’s mind because he could make viewers “feel” his subjects. Whether characterized as direct revelations from the Almighty or paintings likely to bear on the salvation of the average Christian, Martin’s works connected with religious believers. The absence of religious painting in halls of worship created an emotional gap in British religious culture; Martin’s paintings partially filled that gap and by so doing, became very popular with large segments of a still pious population.

Religious subjects offered another advantage to artists competing with popular spectacles for viewers. They attracted a conservative viewing public that otherwise shied away from popular amusements. Between 1820 and 1840, popular evangelicalism rose substantially in Britain.⁸⁷ A large part of the discourse of evangelicalism revolved around the need to combat the secular “commercialization of leisure.”⁸⁸ In 1805, one evangelical observer wrote that “a Christian is most prudent and most honourable who keeps at the greatest distance from the ensnaring and polluting vanities of the world . . . the believer will feel no desire for carnal amusements, nor could he relish them.”⁸⁹ While not all evangelicals were averse to all types of amusements, there was a basic agreement that amusements should be constructive and uplifting.⁹⁰ The historian Richard Altick has

⁸⁶ John Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, 3 vols., vol. 2 (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1874), 104.

⁸⁷ Alan D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel, and Social Change, 1740-1914* (London ; New York: Longman, 1976), 134.

⁸⁸ Roy Porter, *London, a Social History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 68.

⁸⁹ George Burder, *Lawful Amusements; a Sermon Preached at the Thursday Evening Lecture Fetter-Lane, January 10, 1805*, 2nd edition (London, 1805), 34, 36.

⁹⁰ Robert W. Malcolmson, *Popular Recreations in English Society, 1700-1850* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1973), 103.

written in this regard:

One of the most noteworthy elements in the early Victorian cultural climate was the sharpening conflict between what the moral vocabulary of the period differentiated as earnestness and frivolity— between the application of the mind to what were regarded as “useful” and “improving” matters and the carefree indulgence of the innate human desire to enjoy oneself, irrespective of any lasting benefit. To oversimplify and certainly to overdramatize the confrontation, it was a neo-Puritan version of the medieval psychomachia, in which good and evil contested for the soul of Everyman.⁹¹

People were constantly trying to justify commercial spaces to conservative Christians by proving their “useful and improving” status. George Mogridge, a writer for the popular religious press, wrote that London had numerous “places of public interest . . . as may be visited by Christian people in their hours of relaxation, without hampering them in their earthly duties, or hindering them on their way to heaven.”⁹²

Panoramas and dioramas only rarely represented religious narratives because their ultimate goal was to cause viewers to buy into the illusion of tangible reality, and narrative subjects containing motionless figures destroyed that illusion.⁹³ A common substitution was the depiction of the landscape of the Holy Land, and advertisements for such panoramas often emphasized how the dutiful Christian family could safely enjoy them. Speaking of a panorama depicting Damascus, one reporter wrote, “The sacred interest of the subject, attracted thousands of visitors who were not profane enough to enjoy ordinary sights.”⁹⁴ The advertisement for the diorama based on Roberts’s painting *The Delivery of Israel Out of Egypt* clearly stated that it had “been visited by thousands

⁹¹ Altick, *The Shows of London*, 227.

⁹² George Mogridge, *Old Humphrey's Walks in London and Its Neighborhood* (London: religious tract society, 1843), iv.

⁹³ Altick, *The Shows of London*, 178.

⁹⁴ *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, vol. 37 (London, 1841), 122.

of the religious of all denominations, who rarely visit exhibitions.”⁹⁵ Religious themes allowed morality to be infused into spaces of popular amusement that had come to epitomize the immoral in the minds of a substantial portion of the London public. The art of Martin, Danby, and Roberts offered a middle ground where entertaining aspects such as scale and dramatic presentation remained intact, while their representations of biblical narratives attracted a segment of the public that panoramas and other spectacles failed to reach.

One of the most attractive features of religious subjects for an artist was the malleability of them in relation to discourses on contemporary social issues. Not only were biblical stories familiar to most London spectators, they could also signify a wide range of meanings depending on the nature of their representation. The category of “religion” in British society was much more flexible than in many Catholic countries in Europe. In the absence of a state religion, religious discourse in Britain was a site of competition and diversity. This was especially true in the early nineteenth century as the numbers of people involved with dissenting religious groups rose rapidly.⁹⁶ Just as the category of religion was a contested site, so was the employment of religious language, metaphor, and narrative.

People from every ideological strand employed the language of religion during the early decades of the nineteenth century in Britain. At times, the disconnect in logic was so stark that it seems almost inconceivable. For instance, scholar Ian McCalman

⁹⁵ “Handbill Advertising the Departure of the Israelites Diorama,” in *Maylebone Collection* (London: Westminster City Libraries, 1833).

⁹⁶ Richard D. Floyd, *Church, Chapel and Party: Religious Dissent and Political Modernization in Nineteenth-Century England*, Studies in Modern History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 5.; Patrick O'Brien and Roland Quinault, *The Industrial Revolution and British Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 94.

points out that when Robert Taylor founded the “Infidel Society” in London in 1824, he still believed “in God, in Providence and the immortality of the soul’.”⁹⁷ The radical journal *The Medusa* published conflicting views on religion within the same issue in 1819. An article entitled “Christian Policy” outlined a Christian-inspired land reform proposal and was separated by only two pages from an article entitled “Analyzation of the Religious Delusion.”⁹⁸ Historian W. H. Oliver, in his analysis of the perplexing characters Richard Carlile and John Ward, the former an openly atheistic reformer who employed religious language in his writings, the latter an openly religious individual who often cited scientific evidence in support of his arguments, has made the following statement about the period in question:

These continuities remain obscure as long as one takes to the period an attitude of mind which is focused upon conventional dichotomies: religion and irreligion, obscurantism and enlightenment, faith and unbelief. The inter-relationships are a good deal more subtle than those of simple opposition; there is a great deal of commerce across the conventional frontiers. Christianity had a much greater relevance than could be measured by statistics of religious subscription, if they existed. Even the most hardened anti-Christian labored under the necessity of using the language and imagery of his enemy. The language and imagery, in the 1830s, was still in some measure prophetic and millennial. Behind the millennialism lay the English Bible, still a major source of phrases, images and ideas.⁹⁹

As noted by Harrison, the Bible was “still a major source of phrases, images and ideas” that “even the most hardened anti-Christian labored under the necessity of using.” This points to the widespread, even dominant, use of religious rhetoric in ideological debates during the early nineteenth century. Stephen Goldsmith has claimed that “before 1850 . . .

⁹⁷ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 189.

⁹⁸ “Christian Policy; or Spence's Plan,” *The Medusa* 1, no. 17 (1819).

⁹⁹ W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 174.

. religious feeling and biblical terminology so permeated all aspects of thought (including atheism) that it is hard to dismiss them as epiphenomenal.”¹⁰⁰

Religious narratives were not subject to a single, dogmatic interpretation. When they entered the public domain, their meanings were frequently debated and even employed for opposing purposes. Religion offered an artist who wanted to engage with key social issues an effective platform from which to do so. While the multivalent nature of religious discourse ensured that artist representations could be interpreted in a variety of ways, artists exerted a significant amount of control over their representations of religious narratives. Through a careful consideration of the discursive contexts surrounding the works, and an examination of their complex structure, composition, and details, we can begin to recover some of the meanings that may have been conveyed to their original audiences.

The New Spectator

The strategy for artistic success developed by John Martin fostered the creation of a new type of artist, prompted the creation of a new type of art, and engaged a new set of spectators. By way of concluding this chapter, I want to explore the question as to who these new spectators were in social and statistical terms. While precise sociological data on them does not exist, contemporaries constructed the viewers of Martin’s and his followers’ works in consistent and unique ways. These spectators were referred to as “common observers” that “rarely visit[ed] exhibitions” and possessed “ordinary

¹⁰⁰ Steven Goldsmith, *Unbuilding Jerusalem: Apocalypse and Romantic Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), ix.

protestant Christian mind[s].”¹⁰¹ These statements, combined with the substantial uptake in exhibition attendance during exhibitions featuring these artists’ works, suggest that new types of spectators viewed them. Consideration of these spectators is central to my analysis because as the sociological backgrounds of the average spectator of these works expanded, the range of possible meanings the works could have suggested increased likewise.

Due to social and economic constraints, we can surmise that a relatively small segment of British society regularly viewed paintings during the early nineteenth century. Whether access to the works was confined by exhibition halls that charged admission, or the private residences of the collectors, only a privileged few saw most paintings. It is much more difficult to define the sociological background of the presumably average spectator who viewed works by Martin and his followers. For instance, the reader of cheap religious magazines may not have attended the British Institution art exhibition. Yet such readers may have been likely to come across *Belshazzar’s Feast* by Martin in a print shop, the diorama of *The Departure of the Israelites* after David Roberts in an amusement hall, or *The Deliverance of Israel out of Egypt* by Francis Danby printed on the cover the *Christian Penny Magazine* (Figure 2.24). Similarly, we do not know if devoted political reformers frequently attended art exhibitions; at least, we have few published statements from them on art. Yet it is likely that they would have encountered Martin-style imagery in some form. When attempting to ascertain the range of meanings generated by such works, it is necessary to consider how they might have functioned in

¹⁰¹ Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie; with His Journals, Tours, and Critical Remarks on Works of Art; and a Selection from His Correspondence*, 56; citation for diorama ad NEEDED ; Ruskin, *Stones of Venice*, 104.

relation to prevalent social discourses on religion and politics that weighed on the minds of the “ordinary” and “common” people of Britain.

One theme that paintings done in “the style of Martin” invariably invoked, and that carried significant discursive weight during the early nineteenth century, was the apocalypse. In all of Martin’s most famous paintings, the subjects invoked the theme of the apocalypse in one way or another. Even in strictly secular contexts, these paintings referenced the idea of apocalypse and its many connotations. In the following chapter, I turn to an examination of the idea of the apocalypse in the early nineteenth century as a means of securing a foundation for understanding some of the meanings likely to have been conveyed by these works.

Chapter 3

Allusion to Apocalypse

“Truth, imagination, and images may be seen as constituting a whole by which the religious life is ordered.”

- Clyde A. Holbrook¹

In 1796, Benjamin West was the most famous living painter in Britain. Having been elected as president of the Royal Academy four years earlier, West gained a certain artistic freedom afforded to few artists in the commercially driven British art world. He possessed the rare luxury of choosing both what he wanted to paint and how he wanted to paint it, owing to his public stature and his royal patronage. Although West’s reputation had been based on military subjects such as *The Death of General Wolfe* (1771), religious-themed subjects comprised the majority of his oeuvre. In 1784 West first conceived of a painting based on a scene from the Book of Revelation, the final book in the New Testament, wherein the symbolic figure of “Death” would be shown riding over mankind in the “last days.” Twelve years later, he finally exhibited a painting entitled *The Opening of the Four Seals, or Death on a Pale Horse* (Figure 3.1). The twenty-five foot wide painting featured the central figure of Death charging out toward the viewer upon a white horse. Veering from the traditional representation of Death as a robed

¹ Clyde A. Holbrook, *The Iconoclastic Deity: Biblical Images of God* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1984), 12.

skeleton, West portrayed him as a type of hybrid being. West's Death possessed a face devoid of musculature, merely sheathed in a thin sheet of skin stretched over prominent facial bones, yet who also had overly muscular human arms which extend out from under his robe. On the right hand side of the canvas are Death's traditional companions—a rider on a black horse holding scales in his hand, an armored rider on a red horse wielding a sword, and a rider on a white horse (in contrast to Death's "pale horse") who is drawing back his bow and arrow. Beneath Death's horse and at the eye level of the viewer lay a chaotic series of dead or dying individuals exhibiting a wide range of emotions – fear, hopelessness, sadness, anger, acceptance – at the sight of these fantastical beings. In the center of the canvas, a child clothed in bright red garments lay on the ground beneath the raised hoofs of Death's pale horse, yet the impending danger ceases to faze the child as her attention focuses solely on the insipid corpses of her already dead mother and brother. Though the little girl's father exhibits nobility and bravery in his attempts to simultaneously cradle the body of his deceased wife and ward off Death, his demise seems inevitable. West took this traditional biblical narrative, represented before by artists such as Durer, and infused it with a baroque sense of drama, excitement, fear, and action. West chose to represent the narrative as literally as possible. By combining recognizable full-size human figures with the fantastic otherworldly beings described by the apostle John, West asserted the literality of a biblical text which many believed to be symbolic. The literalness of West's interpretation demonstrates one artistic strategy for depicting the subject of the apocalypse, but it was by no means the only strategy.

Four years after West exhibited his apocalyptic vision, a much younger and less famous artist attempted to make his name in the British art world with a similar subject. J.M.W. Turner was a young landscape painter who aspired to be more than an average commercial landscape painter. In order to infuse one of his landscapes with a sense of character and history, Turner decided to paint a narrative-based biblical landscape in the manner of Claude or Poussin. *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* had few visual markers to set it apart from Turner's previous landscape paintings, yet the mere title of the work imbued it with an entirely new set of associations and meanings (Figure 3.2). What on first glance appears to be simply a storm in Egypt becomes transformed by the dead horse and rider in the foreground and the small, almost camouflaged figure of Moses. The presence of Moses marks the painting as a narrative; however, Turner's subjugation of the figure emphasizes other aspects of the scene. In contrast to the shadowy foreground area in which Moses stands, light focuses the viewer on the pyramid in the center of the canvas, then draws the eye through the storm and toward the distant mountains beyond Egypt. Turner employed a neutral palette, dominated by various shades of brown, with only subtle hues of green on trees and a distant blue sky to disrupt the monotony. The city of Egypt is bifurcated by those subtle tonal and chromatic contrasts, as the right side of the canvas contains the glowing edge of a pyramid and a swirling of golden clouds that rise up from a city in flames, while the streaky blue storm clouds rain down on the left side of the canvas. Turner exhibited this painting under the title *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, though most scholars today concur that it actually represented the seventh plague of Egypt—the plague of hail-fire descending from heaven.² Regardless of the accuracy of

² Morton D. Paley and Northrop Frye, *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 102.

the original title, Turner painted a scene of a violent storm that both descends upon and ascends from Egypt, and by placing the figure of Moses with his outstretched arms in the foreground, however small he may be, the storm was signified as resulting from the divine intervention of God.

Visually, West and Turner's paintings seem to possess little common ground. West packed his monumental scene with large-scale figures that lunge out toward the viewer, while Turner's painting contained a solitary diminutive figure designed to draw the viewer into the visual distance. West employed an array of bright colors, often set in sharp contrast to one another, whereas Turner's painting is almost monochromatic. Yet despite such visual contrasts, these two paintings share an ideological kinship: both works invoked the Christian idea of apocalypse. The apocalypse is the manifest subject of *Death on a Pale Horse* and is rendered on such a gigantic scale that it is the equivalent of a visual scream. Though *The Fifth Plague of Egypt* employed a much more subtle type of visual rhetoric derived from landscape painting, during the early nineteenth century, the connections between this subject and the apocalypse would have been obvious to most British spectators.

In the early nineteenth century the idea of apocalypse occupied a prominent position within British culture. Many believed the apocalypse to be an imminent event and examined the bible for signs of its coming. After scouring the Book of Revelation, most turned to the Old Testament and found events that might stand as types for the future apocalypse. A flood of sermons, articles, hymns, tracts, and images present in society at the time re-enforced this type of thought. Thus, for most spectators ancient Egypt was not merely a historical place but rather one of those types; and the plagues

which rained down from heaven upon the Egyptians were not simply part of a religious narrative but part of a metaphor that linked ancient Egypt with modern Britain. Whether signified by a horrific skeletal figure riding a white horse or by swirling storm clouds over the pyramids of Egypt, the message remained largely the same: the violent hand of God has been revealed in the past and will be revealed again in the future.

Yet Turner's method of representation may have possessed even greater resonance with the London public than West's. I want to suggest that the analogical representations of artists like Turner, Martin, Danby, and Roberts were even more significant in relation to the social discourse of the apocalypse than those paintings and prints that actually depicted imagery from the Book of Revelation because they endowed the prophesied future with a sense of reality that was often absent in direct representations of the text. Representations of Old Testament narratives allowed artists to deal in the millenarian discourse while simultaneously distancing their work from the obscurity of the apocalyptic texts. By tying the prophesied future events to what was believed to be the "actual" history of places like Babylon, Nineveh, and Egypt, they endowed the prophecies with a greater sense of reality than was possible from rendering pictorially the overtly strange forms and scenes described by St. John or Daniel.

The Language of Apocalypse

Benjamin West possessed immense artistic freedom, as previously indicated, and his decision to represent this scene from the Book of Revelation in such a dramatic fashion and on such a large scale spoke to the significance of the subject at the time. Similarly, Turner's decision to employ a narrative intimately connected to the apocalypse

at the very moment he was attempting to attract widespread public attention and make a case for his inclusion alongside the great artists of Britain also speaks to the significance of the subject at the time. Within four years of one another, Britain's greatest artist Benjamin West and his eventual successor J.M.W. Turner both opted to tap into the wave of interest in the possibility of an impending violent end to the world that pervaded in British society.

The biblical language of apocalypse is foreign to many living in Western societies today. Perhaps no segment of society experiences this more pointedly than the academic world and those who have passed through its spheres. As one scholar has pointed out, when federal agents at Waco heard David Koresh refer to the seven seals (Revelation 6:1-8:6), they thought he was talking about performing animals.³ However, the belief in a coming apocalypse and millennium is one of the foundational doctrines of Christianity and was by no means a fringe belief held by outsiders or zealots during the period in question.⁴ Between 1800 and 1840 at least 100 books were published in relation to what was called "the signs of the times," a reference to those signs that would precede the second coming of Christ and the apocalypse.⁵ At least ten periodicals on the subject were founded and numerous societies were organized with the notion of the impending

³ Douglas H. Shantz, "Millennialism and Apocalypticism in Recent Historical Scholarship," in *Prisoners of Hope?: Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880*, ed. Crawford Gribben and Timothy C. F. Stunt, *Studies in Evangelical History and Thought* (Carlisle; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004), 35.

⁴ The term "apocalypse" is generally used to refer to the series of violent destructions described in the Book of Revelation, generally thought to precede the second coming of Christ, while the term "millennium" refers to the period of 1000 years following Christ's return where there would be universal peace and prosperity—a type of Christian utopia. Because the two ideas are intimately linked, the adherents or believers in such a phenomenon are generally referred to as millennialists or millenarians.

⁵ Crawford Gribben and Timothy C. F. Stunt, eds., *Prisoners of Hope?: Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880*, *Studies in Evangelical History and Thought* (Carlisle; Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004), 11.

millennium at their core.⁶ Although these beliefs have sometimes been portrayed by scholars as bound to the lower orders of society, during the early nineteenth century they were not constrained by class.⁷ Edward Gibbon, in his immensely popular *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, referred to the apocalypse and the millennium as “the reigning sentiment of orthodox believers.”⁸ Those among the educated classes were just as likely to believe in the apocalypse as those from the lower classes, and that fact does not negate their educated status. As historian J. F. C. Harrison has written,

In our present secular age many people find it difficult to take seriously a belief in the millennium, and by projecting this disbelief into their view of the past they preclude themselves from a sympathetic understanding of earlier millenarians it is puzzling when we find intelligent people expressing beliefs which we can see only as errors and delusions; but this is often a measure of our anachronistic blindness. We simply fail to see the force or logic of something that does not rest on our own intellectual assumptions, and so we are incredulous.⁹

In order to conceive of how apocalyptic subjects were received in early nineteenth-century Britain, it is necessary to treat the idea as seriously as the believers did.

Regardless of the truthfulness of millennialist beliefs, they were some of the “quintessential attitudes of Western civilization,” and the effects produced by these beliefs were invariably real.¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 16.

⁸ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. Oliphant Smeaton (New York: Modern Library, 1980), I:403.

⁹ J. F. C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1979), 3.

¹⁰ Paul A. Cohen, “Time, Culture, and Christian Eschatology: The Year 2000 in the West and the World,” *The American Historical Record* 104, no. 5 (1999): 1628.

The Rise of Apocalyptic Thought: Brothers, Southcott, and Irving

Belief in the reality of a violent apocalypse and subsequent millennium was not a new phenomenon at the end of the eighteenth century. It is, after all, a doctrine rooted in the biblical record. Nevertheless, the way the doctrine functioned in relation to the larger spectrum of Protestant Christian theology changed dramatically near this time period. Prior to the onset of the French Revolution, the prophecies of widespread war, nations being overturned, and the forces of the Antichrist roaming the world seemed somewhat distant to most. But with the storming of the Bastille on July 14, 1789 and the onset of “the Terror” in France, that temporal gap seemed to dissipate. Within a matter of months, prominent religious leaders and philosophers began connecting dots between the signs and symbols St. John foretold in the Book of Revelation and contemporary events in France. The red “Phrygian cap” was interpreted by some as the “mark of the beast,” and both Robespierre and Napoleon were commonly equated with “the beast” in the Book of Revelation.¹¹ People developed complex formulas to connect the number 666, or “the mark of the beast,” to various aspects of the Revolution.¹² One historian has written that the coming of the French Revolution “had the effect of giving off some reality to what had before been only speculation. The surge of interest in prophecy of all kinds was one indication of the need to fit what was new and unprecedented into categories that were

¹¹ David Brady, *Contribution of British Writers between 1560 and 1830 to the Interpretation of Revelation 13.16-18 : (the Number of the Beast) a Study in the History of Exegesis* (Tubingen: J C B Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1983), 238, 49.

¹² One such author first translated the word "Paris" into Latin, then into Greek, then assigned values to letters based on their position in the Greek alphabet, and eventually arrived at the number 666. And even in Tolstoy's famous novel *War and Peace*, the character Pierre learns of the suggestion that the title *L'Empereur Napoleon* would add up to 666 if the letters of the Roman alphabet were given numerical values. *Ibid.*, 245.

old and familiar.”¹³ The French Revolution was the catalyst for a veritable flood of apocalyptic rhetoric that permeated British society at all levels—manual laborers, shopkeepers, lawyers, wealthy landowners—all were inundated with talk of the apocalypse.¹⁴ This broad integration occurred partially because for artists, writers, philosophers, churchmen, and politicians, the apocalypse existed not only as a prophesied event but as the basis for a new type of language and thought, a new ideology. J. F. C. Harrison has asserted that

between 1780 and 1850 Great Britain changed more than she had done for many hundreds of years previously . . . A new ideology to take account of the disruption or weakening of the old social order and to sanction new aspirations was needed. Millenarianism was that ideology.¹⁵

With the ascendancy of millenarianism in the realm of ideas, the political dimension of the doctrine also gained a new scope of consequence—a fact not lost on those with power in British society.

The rise in apocalyptic thought was driven by a wide range of individuals, from rural preachers to London legislators. Three people, however, stand out during the period from 1790-1830: Richard Brothers, Joanna Southcott, and Edward Irving. Each of these individuals occupied a distinct period of time within the era yet the repercussions of their thoughts transcended their individual lifetimes. They collectively demonstrate the range of doctrinal possibility available to religious believers and the political significance of such belief.

¹³ Clarke Garrett, *Respectable Folly: Millenarians and the French Revolution in France and England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 13.

¹⁴ Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s*, 16.

¹⁵ Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 219.

Richard Brothers

In 1794 a destitute former member of the Royal Navy named Richard Brothers published a two-volume work entitled *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times*.¹⁶ In it Brothers declared himself to be an apostle of a new Christian religion and one designated by God to restore the Jews to Israel prior to the second coming of Christ. Brothers began to gain a small, but not insignificant, group of followers. Then in 1795 he was arrested and brought to trial for violating an Elizabethan law prohibiting “writing, printing, and publishing various fantastical prophecies, with an intent to create dissensions, and other disturbances.”¹⁷ The excerpt from Brothers’ book that eventually resulted in his conviction was addressed directly to the king. He wrote, “The Lord God commands me to say to you, George III, King of England, that immediately on my being revealed in London to the Hebrews as their Prince and to all nations as their Governor, your crown must be delivered up to me, that all your power and authority may cease.”¹⁸ Despite the fact that in most accounts of personal interviews Brothers was found to be both reasonable and sane, he was nevertheless committed to a lunatic asylum.

There is little doubt that had Richard Brothers come along ten or twenty years earlier he would have been simply dismissed as a harmless religious zealot. No trial would have been instigated, no imprisonment would have followed. But by 1795 the threat of the French Revolution spilling over onto British soil made Britain a dramatically

¹⁶ Richard Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times, Book the First, Wrote under the Direction of the Lord God and Published by His Sacred Command, It Being the First Sign of Warning for the Benefit of All Nations; Containing with Other Great and Remarkable Things Not Revealed to Any Other Person on Earth, the Restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem by the Year of 1798 under Their Revealed Prince and Prophet* (London, 1794).

¹⁷ Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution*, Early American Studies (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press; Bristol: University Presses Marketing, 2003), 137.

¹⁸ Charles McFarlane George Lillie Craik, Hans Claude Hamilton, *The Pictorial History of England: Being a History of the People, as Well as a History of the Kingdom: Illustrated with Many Hundred Wood-Cuts of Monumental Records*, vol. 3 (London: C. Knight, 1843), 589.

different place, and the case of Richard Brothers reveals the significant political dimension of apocalyptic rhetoric. The famous caricaturist James Gillray highlighted and memorialized the case of Richard Brothers in print form (Figure 3.3). Gillray depicted Brothers in the famous *sans-culotte* garb of the French revolutionaries, while carrying on his back in a "bundle of the elect" the leaders of the opposition in Parliament, toward some sort of millennial paradise.¹⁹ Though the official justification for Brothers' conviction rested on the outlandish command he issued to the King of England, perhaps the most inflammatory portion of his book was the equation of the radical political elements in France with the righteous forces represented in the Book of Revelation. Brothers repeatedly asserted the innocence of French radicals, and described British efforts in the war against France as "men fighting against the spirit of God."²⁰ Gillray highlighted not only Brothers' connection with French radicalism but also the connections between apocalyptic beliefs and parliamentary politics. Therein lay the real danger for the political establishment in Britain. Brothers demonstrated that the apocalypse could be utilized as a rhetorical weapon to undermine the status quo and to assert the coherence of revolution and revelation. While war raged in France, an ideological battle was being waged in Britain over how religious prophecy regarding the apocalypse and millennium would be figured in relation to the French Revolution, and it was a battle that would continue to rage long after Waterloo.

¹⁹ Specifically, Landsowne and Stanhope in the Lords, and Fox and Sheridan in the Commons.

²⁰ Brothers, *A Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times, Book the First, Wrote under the Direction of the Lord God and Published by His Sacred Command, It Being the First Sign of Warning for the Benefit of All Nations; Containing with Other Great and Remarkable Things Not Revealed to Any Other Person on Earth, the Restoration of the Hebrews to Jerusalem by the Year of 1798 under Their Revealed Prince and Prophet*, 2:8.

Joanna Southcott

With the confinement of Richard Brothers, the British government also hoped to confine the ideas he promulgated, yet that objective proved elusive. In 1802 a woman named Joanna Southcott arrived in London and by 1808, she had over 100,000 followers who believed that she was the "woman clothed with the sun" mentioned in the Book of Revelation.²¹ She also claimed to be the individual referenced in Genesis 3:15, whose "seed" would "bruise the head of the serpent." Southcott became pregnant at the age of 64 in 1814, and preached that her son would be the returning Messiah, the individual prophesied of in the Book of Revelation who would usher in the millennium and "rule all nations."²² Though she was not as overtly political or inflammatory as Brothers had been, many saw her influence on British society as a significant threat to the social order.²³ She died prior to the birth of her child, yet many of her followers maintained hope in her theological constructions. One of those followers, George Turner, took up the Southcottian mantle of leadership. In May of 1816 Turner advertised in London newspapers that the cataclysmic events described in the Book of Revelation, Chapter 6, would begin on January 28, 1817. He wrote, "I am ordered on the 28th to go to the Palace Yard and declare the word of the Lord . . . the angel of the Lord shall sink all by earthquake. The whole United Kingdom is to be divided to the people in the role [i.e. the believers]."²⁴ Turner contributed to the rise in popular radicalism that led to the government suspending Habeas Corpus in 1817 due to the fear of full-scale revolution.

²¹ Tim Fulford, "Pagodas and Pregnant Throes: Orientalism, Millenarianism and Robert Southey" in *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, ed. Tim Fulford (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 131.

²² See Joanna Southcott, *Song of Moses and the Lamb* (London, 1804).

²³ Fulford, "Pagodas and Pregnant Throes: Orientalism, Millenarianism and Robert Southey", 131.

²⁴ See Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 120.

Like Richard Brothers before him, Turner was arrested, convicted, and eventually committed to an asylum.

Edward Irving

The focus on the apocalypse remained lively throughout the 1820s, due in part to preachers such as the Reverend Edward Irving. While Irving did not initiate the construction of a new sect or claim to have any special role in ushering in the millennium, he made the apocalypse a central doctrine in his speeches and theology. Irving would frequently attract crowds of over 10,000 people to his open-air sermons, both inside and outside of London. In 1823 *The Christian Observer* remarked in a review of one of Irving's books, "it is scarcely possible to mention the writer of this work within ten miles of the metropolis, without calling forth the language of exalted praise or excessive vituperation."²⁵ His popularity and notoriety stemmed partially from his charismatic style of preaching but also from the central tenet of his theology—the impending apocalypse. His obsession with the idea caused him to author an extensive treatise devoted exclusively to the interpretation of the Book of Revelation. In addition, Irving initiated the Albury Conferences, a set of meetings designed to gather religious experts to study the apocalypse.²⁶ This association also prompted a critic in *The Westminster Review* to connect Irving specifically with the works of Martin. When describing Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*, the critic wrote that in the center of the painting was the prophet Daniel, and "the prophet is Reverend Mr. Irving."²⁷ This quotation

²⁵ *The Christian Observer* 23, no. 8 (1823): 490.

²⁶ Edward Irving, *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God: A Discourse on the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia, Pa.: The Church Missionary House, 1828).

²⁷ "Illustrations of the Bible by John Martin," *Westminster Review* 20, no. 40 (1834): 455.

evidences both Irving's stature during the period and also how Martin's paintings were viewed as contemporary commentaries on modern London. Irving was eventually accused of heresy, but he never incurred the wrath of the British government the way that Brothers and Turner did because his particular interpretation of the apocalypse led him to decry democracy and support the divine right of kings.

Why the Apocalypse Matters

These examples offer a glimpse into some of the prominent themes and inconsistencies that accompanied the period's discourse on the apocalypse. One thing to note is that the apocalypse is by nature political. It maintained its political tinge even when propagators of the idea attempted to be apolitical, as in the case of Joanna Southcott. Historian W.H. Oliver has claimed that

all theorizing based upon the biblical images of world history and its ending is either implicitly or explicitly political . . . Anti-Christ, Armageddon, and the returned Christ are never less than political, however much more they may be . . . The stream of prophetic commentary from the 1780s to the 1830s was really if not solely a way of conducting a moralistic political discussion. The commentators . . . used the prophetic tradition as a way of evaluating their society and its political life.²⁸

While links between the apocalypse and the realm of politics remain beyond dispute in post-revolutionary Europe, the precise type of politics propagated by belief in the apocalypse and millennium remains ambiguous. Too often, in our own modern era, people assume that believers in Christianity have always been politically conservative. Such an association is not only *inaccurate* with regard to the early nineteenth century but

²⁸ Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s*, 150.

in many ways the *inverse* holds true; during that period, Christian principles often provided the impetus for radical or progressive politics. To take one well known example, the anti-slavery campaign in Britain was waged largely by Christians wielding scripture as an ideological weapon in the halls of Parliament. The connections between Christianity and radical or progressive politics transcended this single issue. When Lord Sidmouth introduced a bill in Parliament designed to check the spread of Methodist preachers in 1811, he stated flatly, “to be a Methodist is to be a Jacobin in the extreme.”²⁹ In addition, for the average millenarian who interpreted the Catholic Church as the Antichrist prophesied in the Book of Revelation, the French revolutionaries’ antipathy toward religion was viewed as fundamentally positive and even providential.

At the core of millenarian thought lies the idea of change, specifically, change in the structure of the social and economic order. In the *Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, Cambridge theologian Andrew Chester has written regarding the millenarian tradition:

It is precisely because it represents a powerful vision of the world as God wills it to be, a world and society ordered by true justice and peace, that it can inform critical Christian engagement with society . . . What this tradition represents then, is above all a transforming and liberating vision. It is a vision of both cosmic renewal and individual fulfillment, but it involves neither cosmic nor individual dualism. The hope of renewal and resurrection denotes a vision of the transformation of the world and the individual, not escape from the world or self.³⁰

As Dr. Chester notes, the millennium is about transformation and liberation, but not of the standard Christian type which takes place in the afterlife. The millenarian tradition concerns transforming the world as presently constituted so that “true justice and peace”

²⁹ “Correspondences (Dissenting Ministers),” 8 June 1811, Addington papers, Devon County Record Office, Exeter.

³⁰ Andrew Chester, “Eschatology,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 256.

can reign. The pressing nature of the apocalypse and millennium is indicated by the front page of a religious tract from the 1820s entitled *The Christian's Diary*, which carried the subtitle, "likewise foretelling, the utter destruction of the heathens and Turks; the general calling of the Jews together; and what happy times will succeed to many people; when the poor will be had in equal (or perhaps superior) estimation with the rich."³¹ Due to its predilection for both violent revolution and prediction of future economic equality, some have asserted that during this period radical politics and millenarianism were most likely seen as "indivisible."³² Even anti-religious radicals often utilized the language of the apocalypse to justify political beliefs and rally people to their causes. It was not uncommon for working class radicals to emphasize reason over scripture and then, in apparent contradictions, cite scripture in support of their political causes.³³

There is a danger of overstating the links between radical politics and millenarianism. The aforementioned preacher Edward Irving was by no means isolated in his firm belief in the impending apocalypse and the wickedness of democratic institutions, radical revolutionaries, and the idea of "progress." Because "progress" results in changes to society, those changes can be interpreted in opposing ways: as the faults that will invite the wrath of God, or as the remedies for pre-existing problems. This theological conundrum resulted in apocalyptic believers promulgating a number of different political positions. It undoubtedly caused some to withdraw from the political process altogether and await the inevitable judgments, but it caused others to promote political causes designed to stay the hand of God. Because applied Christian doctrine

³¹ *The Christian's Diary; or an Almanack for One Day* (London: J. Evans, 1820s).

³² Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 145. McCalman notes that Wedderburn often did this.

transversed the political spectrum, nineteenth-century millenarians often did not fit comfortably into current conceptions of either progressive or conservative politics. Due to these inherent complexities, the apocalypse must be treated as a neutral political entity that could be employed in myriad ways—as “a mode of expression, a means of communication, rather than an end with an agreed meaning and programme.”³⁴ One historian has summarized the dynamic in the following terms:

In itself, apocalyptic belief displayed neither revolutionary nor conservative characteristics in its social and political thrust. . . . It certainly worked to reinforce existing attitudes toward social and political action with its polarized view of the universe, its stress upon an imminent catastrophic end of the normal world, and its propensity towards prophecy, apocalyptic thought operated as a powerful rational and emotional weapon in the ideological dispute.³⁵

When examining representations related to the apocalypse it is crucial to keep this neutrality in mind to allow for a range of potential connotations, meanings and associations of the concept rather than assuming a certain politics inhabits images of future apocalypse.

The intellectual nature of the nineteenth-century discourse on the apocalypse set it apart from earlier periods of apocalyptic fervor. Norman Cohn’s seminal work *Pursuit of the Millennium* (1957), which focuses on medieval millenarianism, portrays millenarians as essentially social revolutionaries from the uneducated, marginalized, and dispossessed portions of society.³⁶ But on the heels of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, many of the individuals who promoted millenarian ideas near the turn of the nineteenth century were more aptly defined as philosophers. Richard Price and Joseph Priestly were two

³⁴ Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 6.

³⁵ Paul Christianson, *Reformers and Babylon: English Apocalyptic Visions from the Reformation to the Eve of the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 7.

³⁶ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, revised and expanded ed. (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1970).

such men. While both eventually became clergymen, Price began as a mathematician and a philosopher, Priestly, as a chemist. They were labeled as radical reformers due to their interpretation of the Book of Revelation, yet the manner in which they approached the apocalypse contrasted sharply with the ways in which that concept functioned in the medieval period, as described by Cohn. Price and Priestly “domesticated” the idea of the millennium by teaching that

an army of saints was not going to combat the evil Anti-Christ, but an army of consciously educated citizens was. The human mind, not the sword, was the weapon in this godly quest for liberty and virtue. Only when they achieved the intellectual and spiritual power to delve into the mysteries of God’s universe would they at last be ready to begin their movement toward the millennium.³⁷

This shift in perspective, from a movement devoid of rational thought to one driven by it, largely accounts for the multivalent ways in which millennial ideas were employed in the early nineteenth century. While the dispossessed and downtrodden described by Cohn still utilized the language of the millennium to accomplish their purposes, Price and Priestly’s “domestication” of the millennium allowed for its employment in less violent, yet still politically radical ways. In the theological structures described by Price and Priestly, outright revolution, though not entirely discounted, was dampened by the notion of peaceful political progress.

The Cultural Production of Apocalypse

Writers and artists acted as conduits through which the complex ideas relating to the apocalypse were articulated and explained to the public. These individuals assisted in the dissemination of such ideas to a broader audience and also determined the precise

³⁷ Jack Fruchtman, *Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-Century English Republican Millennialism* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 1-2.

shape the discourse took. Virtually every major romantic writer in Britain touched upon the themes of apocalypse and millennium. Numerous scholars have explored in-depth how writers like William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelly integrated this theological concept into their writings.³⁸ In addition to these living writers, perhaps the most famous English writer of the previous age, Milton, was also a millenarian. Milton's inclusions of apocalyptic imagery in his most famous text, *Paradise Lost*, inspired not only the literature but the politics of the Romantic era.³⁹ During the period of the French Revolution, a retiring classical scholar named Gilbert Wakefield was arrested and thrown in prison due almost exclusively to his expertise on Milton's writings and an assumed connection to radical politics that accompanied them.⁴⁰ Milton's narratives also inspired paintings and prints from some of the leading artists of the day, including Henry Fuseli, William Blake, J. M. W. Turner, and John Martin.⁴¹ Martin, for instance, produced an extremely successful illustrated version of *Paradise Lost*.

³⁸M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Morton D. Paley, *Apocalypse and Millennium in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1999); Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002); Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake* ([East Lansing]: Michigan State University Press, 1967).

³⁹Joseph Anthony Wittreich, "Milton's Romantic Audience," *American Notes and Queries* x, no. 10 (1972); James G. Nelson, *The Sublime Puritan: Milton and the Victorians* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974); Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost, and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1993); Joseph Anthony Wittreich, *The Romantics on Milton; Formal Essays and Critical Asides. With a Critical Introd. And Notes* (Cleveland,: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970); Peter J. Kitson, "Coleridge, Milton and the Millennium" *The Wordsworth Circle* 17 (1987).

⁴⁰ Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, 4.

⁴¹ Fuseli created an entire commercial gallery that he filled with his own Miltonic works called "The Milton Gallery." See Luisa Calè, *Fuseli's Milton Gallery: 'Turning Readers into Spectators'* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006). For details on other Miltonic works of the period, see Marcia R. Pointon, *Milton & English Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1970); Stephen C. Behrendt, *The Moment of Explosion: Blake and the Illustration of Milton* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); Howard J.M. Hanley Robert Woold, Stephen Hebron, *Paradise Lost: The Poem and Its Illustrators* (Grasmere: The Wordsworth Trust, 2004).

The theme of the apocalypse was present in virtually every sphere of the art world, encompassing a wide range of artists, artistic styles, and both academic and popular art. Whether found in the grand-manner paintings of Benjamin West, the sublime landscapes of Turner, the revelatory works of William Blake, the popular destruction paintings of Martin, the numerous illustrated bibles, or the commercial panoramas, the idea of apocalypse underlay much of British visual culture in the early nineteenth century. The combination of the attention given to the subject of the apocalypse by the most significant artists of the day and the new ways in which imagery was utilized and distributed throughout British society, makes visual media fertile ground for studying how the idea of apocalypse functioned in society.

Visualizing the Apocalypse

Art possessed some unique advantages over text in disseminating and shaping public conceptions of the apocalypse. The portions of the bible most often employed by millenarians, including the Book of Revelation and portions of the Book of Daniel, are generally considered to be the most complicated and convoluted sections in the Bible. Rather than containing historical narratives or counsel for righteous living, the Book of Revelation takes a symbolic look at a future where strange beasts, candlesticks, whores, horses, dragons, and massive objects descend out of heaven. Likewise, the vision of Nebuchadnezzar contained in the Book of Daniel regarding “the last days” involves the interpretation of a statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, a belly of brass, legs of iron, and feet made partly of iron and partly of clay.⁴² Comprehending the

⁴² Daniel 2: 31-33.

symbols described in these books was (and remains) a matter of great contention among theologians. For most lay people, the text required mediation and interpretation.

In order to overcome this inherent complexity, many authors employed visual diagrams as a way of simplifying the prophecies. The seventeenth-century scholar Joseph Mede developed one of the most famous of these diagrams and reproduced it in his *Key of the Revelation* (1627) (Figure 3.4).⁴³ This circular diagram contains a central linear timeline divided on both top and bottom by numerous cyclical lines and text that integrate both political and religious history into the Book of Revelation prophecies. Early nineteenth-century publications of Mede's work included this diagram and encouraged other millenarians to create visual plans to simplify the convoluted revelations. Mede avoided representing any of the fantastic beasts or creatures described in Daniel and the Book of Revelation. However, those figures became crucial parts of many early nineteenth century apocalyptic diagrams. An 1842 diagram entitled "A Chronological Chart of the visions of Daniel and John" combined a figurative version of Daniel's multi-layered statue along with numerous mythical beasts interspersed with sequences of text and highlighted years that indicated the progress history has made toward the apocalypse (Figure 3.5). In 1893, British author John Ashton Savage included a similar mixed diagram in his book *The Scroll of Time*. He justified its inclusion on the grounds that by "appealing to the eye, which the understanding and memory are more readily and vividly impressed than by mere verbal description—a comprehensive view of the order and relative connections of the several dispensations

⁴³ Joseph Mede and Richard of Linley More, *The Key of the Revelation Searched and Demonstrated out of the Naturall and Proper Charecters of the Visions. With a Coment Thereupon, According to the Rule of the Same Key ... With a Præface Written by Dr Twisse, Etc*, trans. Richard More (London, 1643).

may be readily seen and remembered.”⁴⁴ In Savage's view, visual mechanisms simultaneously facilitated comprehension of complex issues and the process of instilling those issues in the mind of believing Christians. The text could stand alone but images impressed the mind “more readily and vividly.” They thus became crucial components in the transmission of apocalypse theology to the believing public.

The Book of Revelation also lends itself to artistic representation due to its implicitly visual nature. Though interpreting the theological significance of the strange symbols is complex, depicting them is much more manageable. The book is comprised of a series of “visions” received by St. John, and thus has a natural affinity with visual media. One historian has described it in the following terms:

No fewer than 36 times in his 22 chapters, John writes *kai eidon* (“and I saw”) . . . the visions, filled with colors, jewels, shapes and measuring, are less like a moving picture than “stills”. . . visual motifs run through the book as a whole, associating the various visions: the four creatures, horses, swords, sun and moon, scrolls and so on. So the book is sometimes described as a “kaleidoscope”, making a powerful religious impression through ceaseless visual impact on the reader.⁴⁵

The inherently visual nature of the text not only provided the impetus for artists to represent it, but also placed those artists in a position of significant influence in shaping how the public perceived the convoluted imagery. J. F. C. Harrison has noted, “Strengthening of the millenarian appeal came from the tremendous visual impact of passages in Daniel and Revelation. The millenarian message was communicated through

⁴⁴ As quoted in David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), 187.

⁴⁵ Christopher Burdon, *The Apocalypse in England: Revelation Unravelling, 1700-1834*, Studies in Literature and Religion (St. Martin's Press, 1997), 18.

powerful images, conjured up in the mind and portrayed by artists.”⁴⁶ We might push the connections made by Harrison a step further. I would contend that the relationship between that which is “conjured up in the mind” and that which is “portrayed by artists” is more fundamental than Harrison asserts. Since no historical precedents existed for the future described in the Book of Revelation, at least none that included the complex imagery of multi-headed beasts, floating candlesticks, dragons, and so forth, depictions of these images greatly impacted conceptions of them in the minds of the religious public.

In addition, artistic representations offered viewers a touchstone to reality amidst the convoluted visions in the book. While to modern eyes Benjamin West’s conception of the living dead on horseback might seem outside the spectrum of reality, evidence suggests that the distance between imagination and perceived reality in the early nineteenth century was not so substantial. In 1810, the English novelist William Beckford wrote regarding the apocalypse:

I see this terrible day issuing from the sanctuary of divine justice. It will not dawn on Windsor or London, for the Bank, Palace, Castle, and Cathedral, all will have vanished. Over deserted smoking plains pale Napoleon will be seen galloping. It will be West's apocalypse, his *Triumph of Death*, painted in the same terrible colours, a mingling of mire and blood.⁴⁷

The convergence of actual history with pictorial representation in Beckford’s text suggests just how powerful representations of the apocalypse could be in British society. Beckford’s own conception of what the apocalypse would look like hinged more precisely on what he had seen in paint and on canvas than on the text of the Book of Revelation. Due to the complexity of the text, it can be assumed that Beckford was not

⁴⁶Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 227.

⁴⁷ William Beckford, *Life at Fonthill 1807-1822 with Interludes in Paris and London from the Correspondence*, ed. Boyd Alexander, trans. Boyd Alexander (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1957), 96.

alone in his reliance on artistic translations when attempting to picture what many believed to be imminent events.

Pictorial imagery surely helped the British populace to imagine the apocalypse. Yet despite the efforts of artists like West, there remained a fundamental disconnection between perceived reality and direct visual translations of the apocalyptic texts. These representations may have made the symbols more concrete, but they still offered to the viewer something rather foreign to lived experience. For instance, in West's painting *The Destruction of the Old Beast and the False Prophet* (1804) (Figure 3.6), he elected to make the scene more palatable by eliminating certain symbolic elements that defied reality altogether. According to the text, the individual astride the white horse should have "many crowns" on his head and a sharp sword emanating from his mouth, but West probably felt those elements to be so distant from perceived reality that he omitted them. Nevertheless, despite the single crown and the lack of swords in mouths, the painting still contains an army of horses floating on clouds along with a multi-headed beast in the foreground composed from different animals.⁴⁸ Literal representations of the apocalyptic text, even when adjusted slightly to avoid the most perplexing symbols, were inevitably disconnected from lived experience.

There was, however, another way to engage the discourse on the apocalypse without literally representing the Book of Revelation or the vision of Daniel. The Book of Revelation connects certain places, cities, and peoples of the past with the future events. For instance, the text employs the term "Babylon the great" in the symbolic narrative of the apocalypse. Revelation Chapter eighteen begins with an angel declaring

⁴⁸ This may be West's attempt to represent the beast described by John in Revelation 13:12: "And the beast which I saw was like unto a leopard, and his feet were as the feet of a bear, and his mouth as the mouth of a lion."

that “Babylon the Great is fallen;” he then proceeds to outline the crimes and punishments of the city.⁴⁹ This enabled Babylon to play a dual role as wicked city of the past and soon-to-be-destroyed city of the future. In addition, following the theological convention in which the Old Testament was interpreted as foreshadowing the New Testament, millenarian preachers often cited episodes from the biblical past as types for what would occur during the apocalypse and millennium. Various historical narratives, including the flood, the fall of Nineveh, and the plagues of Egypt were employed in a rhetorical fashion as warnings of future destructions described in the Book of Revelation. Millenarians generally lacked the sense of temporal distance from the biblical past that one might assume readers of the bible to have possessed, had they read it as an historical document. Regarding such a belief in imminent apocalypse, J. C. F. Harrison has written, “Life in Old Testament days was treated as similar to modern times, with prophets, miracles and God’s commandments as plain now as then. For to the true millenarian past and present fused together, and place had little significance.”⁵⁰ This temporal merging of time and place allowed artists to engage the apocalypse through representation of biblical scenes that connected analogically to the apocalypse.

As a means of endowing their representations with an aura of “truth,” analogical representations looked to the past for their assertions regarding the future. Alberti wrote that “painting possesses a truly divine power in that not only does it make the absent present, but it also represents the dead to the living.”⁵¹ The ability to conceive of a time, a place, and an event removed from the reality of the present has been a chief function of

⁴⁹ Revelation 18:2

⁵⁰ Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 191.

⁵¹ Leon Battista Alberti and Cecil Grayson, *On Painting and on Sculpture. The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua* (London: Phaidon, 1972), 60.

art throughout history. As Alberti noted, there is an inherent power in the physical presentation of historic events that can serve to re-enforce the “truth” of the depicted moment. However, by the early nineteenth-century, spectators had largely been conditioned to look at history painting with a somewhat critical eye and to assume that what artists represented was simply that – representation.⁵² Nevertheless, there remained means by which artists who painted history and scripture could create an aura of “truth,” and John Martin utilized nearly all of them.

Empirical Evidence

One strategy artists employed to endow their works with a sense of “reality” or “truth” was proclaiming their adherence to empirical observation in the process of creation. The rise of particular forms of popular visual culture, such as detailed topographic maps, illustrations of ancient architectural remains, and encyclopedias of foreign cultures had conditioned nineteenth-century spectators to separate empirically-based representations from scenes conceived entirely in the artist’s imagination. As one scholar has stated,

What distinguishes late seventeenth and early eighteenth century books from the situation a hundred years later is that the empirical possibilities of illustrations as bearers of meaning in their own right are in their infancy. It is not until last quarter of the eighteenth century that illustration comes into its own as a form of knowledge.⁵³

Concomitant with the rise of illustration as a means of producing knowledge was the decline of history painting’s ability to act in a similar manner. Genres like portraiture or landscape were naturally empirical since their subjects could have been directly viewed,

⁵² Sam Smiles, *Eye Witness: Artists and Visual Documentation in Britain 1770-1830* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), 26-28.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

but the claims to truth of history or literary painting lacked a tangible basis. The challenge intensified further for painters of biblical scenes in the early nineteenth century, as the historical validity of the Bible was under siege from multiple directions. Jonathan Sheehan has noted how toward the end of the eighteenth century the Bible was transformed from a work of theology and history into a work of culture.⁵⁴ At the heart of that cultural transformation was the idea of biblical criticism. Biblical criticism prescribed that the bible be scrutinized using rational means and essentially be treated it like any other text. While not solely focused on the destruction of biblical claims to truth, biblical criticism did allow for individuals to speak out against the perceived historical reality of the biblical version of the past. Scientific discoveries that challenged key aspects of biblical history, notably events such as the creation and the flood, fueled further criticism.⁵⁵ If biblical painters wanted to create works that possessed a sense of universal truth they had to develop strategies for reaffirming the reality of the biblical past as well as for challenging conventional wisdom regarding the possibilities of historical representation.

Martin apparently recognized that in order for his paintings to have any claim on historical truth he had to signify their connection with empirical reality. Through both visual and textual means Martin asserted his devotion to empirical data by proclaiming his personal efforts to learn the history of his subjects before painting them. Martin almost always composed and published pamphlets to accompany the exhibition of his

⁵⁴ Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). Though Sheehan focuses more on the German context, he also discusses how the ideas in Germany appeared in Britain as well.

⁵⁵ Vernon F. Storr, *The Development of English Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (London, New York: Longmans, Green and company, 1913), 181.

pictures, with the intent of clarifying subjects and elucidating the scenes filled with hundreds of minute figures (Figure 3.7). His texts highlighted his familiarity with well-known historical sources outside of the biblical tradition. The pamphlet that accompanied *The Fall of Nineveh* contained the following passage:

Sacred and profane history unite in representing the city of Nineveh to have been of immense size. The Bible states it to have been a three day's journey in circumference. Strabo says it was much larger than Babylon . . . by the lovers of severe historical accuracy it must doubtless be regretted that the Assyrian history, of Herodotus, should have been lost. He had traveled into the country, and heard from the natives the traditions that had come down to them . . . the extreme obscurity of Assyrian history may be learned from the fact, that, by Herodotus, the duration of the Empire is limited to 520 years only; while Ctesias, and others, estimate it at upwards of 1400.⁵⁶

In the first line of this passage, Martin affirmed that his painting bore evidence from “profane” history, in addition to “sacred” history. By binding his biblical narratives to secular historical accounts, Martin sidestepped the challenges facing the representation of a past derived solely from the bible. Also, Martin took great care always to cite a number of different historical sources that informed his conception of the scene. Even in this passage, where Herodotus’ account offered no new historical information on Nineveh, Martin explained what Herodotus might have said had his record not been lost. By signifying his knowledge of non-biblical historical sources, even when they had no direct impact on the painting, Martin projected himself as a historical expert. Furthermore, he defined those who lamented this absence of Herodotus’ account, which by implication included himself, as “lovers of severe historical accuracy.” The employment of dramatic terms like “lovers” and “severe” also added a sense of dedication and seriousness to

⁵⁶ John Martin, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Picture of the Fall of Nineveh* (London: Plummer and Brewis, 1828), 5.

Martin's tone. While the ostensible purpose of the pamphlet was to help spectators makes sense of the canvas, many passages also served to highlight the artist's intimate familiarity history as a means of lending an aura of truth to the scene.

In addition to historical familiarity, Martin often integrated knowledge of the contemporary Middle East into his paintings. He was something of a forerunner in this regard. Much has been written about the French "Orientalists" and the British Pre-Raphaelite Brethren's integration of contemporary Middle Eastern details into the biblical paintings.⁵⁷ For instance, in Horace Vernet's *Judah and Tamar* (1840) the biblical characters wear Arab dress from the nineteenth century, with the implicit understanding that the "Orient" was a timeless place lacking in any type of cultural evolution (Figure 3.8).⁵⁸ Almost two decades before Vernet's work was exhibited, Martin employed essentially the same artistic mechanisms. In the pamphlet for *Belshazzar's Feast*, the artist wrote:

As far as the costume of Oriental nations in the remotest ages can be guessed at, or has yielded to the strenuous and successive researches of patient and skillful antiquarians, it has been adhered to with all possible accuracy. And, indeed, when we compare several passages in the holy Scriptures, descriptive of ornamental apparel, with the dress still in use among the Hindoos and other aborigines of the eastern dominions, we find every reason to believe that, owing to local, civil and religious causes, the costume of the present princes of Persia and of the Hindostan Empire, differs but very little, if at all, from what it used to be in the days of Belshazzar and Cyrus . . . The multiplicity of the highly wrought and variegated garments of the prominent figures, and even of those in the distant parts of the halls, became a powerful agent in the conception of the artist to diversify his groups, to enliven a whole, and to satisfy at once the discerning eye of taste and the mental ken of classical knowledge.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ See Mary Anne Stevens, *The Orientalists: Delacroix to Matisse: The Allure of North Africa and the near East* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1984); Michaela Giebelhausen, *Painting the Bible: Representation and Belief in Mid-Victorian Britain* (Aldershot, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006); John M. MacKenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory, and the Arts* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 44.

⁵⁹ John Martin, *A Description of the Picture Belshazzar's Feast Painted by Mr. J. Martin Which Gained the Highest Premium at the British Institution* (London: J. Robins and Co. Albion Press, 1825), 13.

The attention devoted to exploring the possibilities relating to ancient biblical clothing and its connection to modern Middle-Eastern dress cohere closely with the efforts of the official contemporary French academic painters.⁶⁰ In addition, in the passage Martin carefully noted the findings of “patient and skillful antiquarians” and included himself in among them as he repeatedly said “we” when describing their findings. Martin’s accompanying texts constantly asserted his knowledge, both historical and contemporary of his subject. This enhanced the ability of his paintings to impart “knowledge” and “truth” to critical spectators.

The assertions made in the pamphlets were coupled with visual mechanisms designed to convince spectators that the paintings revealed the “truth” of history. For those spectators who did not purchase or read his pamphlets, Martin signified his knowledge of historical sources through his employment of minute detail. He painted almost exclusively on large canvases and took great care to paint even the smallest details in his scenes—too much detail for some critics, who found it to be somewhat overwhelming. Yet it is important to note the effect of that kind of minute detail had on viewers. In 1833, *Arnold's Magazine of the Fine Arts* published an article entitled “On the Genius of John Martin,” wherein the writer characterized this aspect of his painting:

No one can look upon and admire the pictures of this artist, without being struck with the true and apparent fact, that in painting one picture he paints a thousand, and that the faults, with which she has been charged by some, of minuteness of detail, and of heightening up every part of the picture to such an exquisite degree of finish as almost to dazzle the spectator, may rather be considered as errors on the right side. Every column, every temple, and every vase of gold, is a separate

⁶⁰ This trend was utilized by Orientalist painters like Vernet, but it was also employed by classical painters such as Ingres. See Susan Siegfried, “Faith in Materials: Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres,” *Art History* 28, no. 5 (2005).

study in itself; and, if one large picture were to be cut up and divided into smaller ones, they would each form a most exquisite and beautiful bit of art.⁶¹

This reviewer suggested that this “dazzling” effect might have had impact beyond superficial sensation. The fact that the review called each of the objects “a separate study in itself” demonstrates the way in which the attention paid to even the smallest objects could be seen as evidence of intense study on the artist’s part. When the director of the Royal Gallery in Berlin, G. F. Waagen, attended the exhibition of Martin’s *The Fall of Nineveh*, he noted how “the practical imaginative feeling which predominates in the whole, the naturalness, nay, even *historical truth* in the details is very remarkable.”⁶² In the same sentence, Waagen commented on both the “imagination” and the “historical truth” evidenced in the painting, suggesting that these two conventionally contradictory ideas could somehow act in concert in the paintings of this artist. The attention to detail in Martin’s works served as a visual reminder of the “studying” of historical records he undertook prior to painting.

As Benjamin West before him had done in paintings such as *The Destruction of the Old Beast and the False Prophet*, Martin also eliminated narrative details that would have conflicted with perceived reality. Even analogical representations of the apocalypse from the Old Testament contained miraculous or otherworldly elements. For instance, the narrative of Belshazzar’s feast reaches its apex in the moment when the hand of God writes a warning to Belshazzar on the wall. When attempting to depict this scene, most artists included a disembodied hand of God writing words on a wall, as in Rembrandt’s version of the scene (Figure 3.9). Martin chose to paint the moment immediately after

⁶¹ “The Genius of John Martin,” *Arnold’s magazine of the Fine Arts*, December 1833, 101.

⁶² Gustav Friedrich Waagen and Hannibal Evans Lloyd, *Works of Art and Artists in England*, trans. H. E. Lloyd, (London, 1838), 2:162.

the words had been written. This choice allowed Martin to eliminate painting the floating hand of God and maintain a greater connection to reality. An 1841 reviewer of Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast* noted the affect of this compositional choice in an article published in the Liverpool Mercury daily newspaper. The author wrote, "No small dead fingers wrote in black letters on the wall. The awful hand that had written was gone; but the pen had been lightning; and the fiery unknown characters stood fixed, shooting forth intolerable light before which men fled aghast . . . others give small parts only; [Martin] gives the whole."⁶³ By emphasizing narrative moments that minimized the tension between the biblical record and lived experience, Martin's works were able to more effectively convey a sensation of reality in his paintings.

Martin's employment of precisely calculated perspective of extreme visual depth also helped his works seem empirical. Martin was famous for his use of accurate, deep perspective, so much so that mathematicians from Cambridge conversed with him about his paintings in an attempt to understand his complex calculations.⁶⁴ One recurring feature in the pamphlets that accompanied the paintings was the precise measurements for architectural features, geographical features, and human figures. For instance, *The Fall of Nineveh* pamphlet provided the following details:

The western wall of the city, 300 feet from the banks of the river, and running parallel with it. This wall is said to have been 100 feet in height, and of breadth sufficient to allow three chariots abreast to drive upon its summit . . . a gateway ground with towers, 200 feet in height. At the entrance of the gate stands a human figure, which, estimated at the height of 6 feet, gives the scale of measurement by which every object in the picture is worked.⁶⁵

⁶³ "Paintings by Mr. John Martin," *Liverpool Mercury and Lancashire General Advertiser*, Friday, August 27 1841, 283.

⁶⁴ Leopold Martin, "Reminiscences of John Martin," *The Newcastle Observer*, January 26 1889.

⁶⁵ Martin, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Picture of the Fall of Nineveh*, 12.

This precise description of perspective and scale emphasized Martin's attention to recorded architectural details, and lent the canvas a type of historical authority. Not only did Martin take great care with perspectival distance but with the relative scale of "every object in the picture." Calling attention in this way to the physical dimensions of things assured viewers that they were witnessing a plausible scene and implied that the vision they beheld was the same as the one a spectator of the purported event would have seen. This attention to scale and perspective largely accounts for Martin's ability to create scenes that were fantastic yet simultaneously conveyed a sense of historical reality. Historian of English literature Martin Meisel believes that despite the surreal nature of Martin's compositions, there always remains within his scenes "a persistent kernel of bounded identity."⁶⁶

The tension Martin created between deep perspective, which draws the viewer into the physical space, and miniscule detail, which appeals to the viewer's tactile sense, added significantly to the overall effect of his paintings. An obituary of the artist written in 1854 gave some sense of this effect:

The 'ancients' sought only to portray great scenical events by episodes, or portions of those events. The "handwriting on the wall" [*Belshazzar's Feast*] has been painted by many great artists—but in what way? By three or four figures and a blaze of light. How has Martin treated it? By carrying you into the very scene—by making you not only a spectator, but a living participant in what is before you. He was no borrower. Did any man before him understand distance so well as John Martin understood it and make his spectators feel it?⁶⁷

The author believed that the artist's scientific understanding of perspective and distance, combined with the uniqueness of his conceptions, allowed his works to transform

⁶⁶ Martin Meisel, "The Material Sublime: John Martin, Byron, Turner, and the Theater," in *Images of Romanticism: Verbal and Visual Affinities*, ed. Karl and Walling Kroeber, William (New Haven: Yale University press, 1978), 231.

⁶⁷ "Town and Table Talk on Literature, Art, Etc.," *The Illustrated London News* 24, no. 670 (1854): 163.

spectators into “living participants.” Space and distance are generally considered to be impalpable, but Martin's employment of them seemed to confer a dimension of tangibility on them. As another reviewer noted, Martin was able to make “the darkness visible.”⁶⁸ The obituary also alluded to the way the paintings somehow robbed viewers of their agency: Martin “*makes* his spectators feel” the distance in his works. This has a ring of hyperbole, yet there is some truth to the way that these compositions draw viewers into a fantastic, yet seemingly actual, space. As viewers visually enter Martin’s spaces, they become even more aware of the physical reality conveyed by each minute detail. The forceful “drawing in” effect provided a sensation of empirical reality in the face of the numerous challenges confronting history painters in the early nineteenth century.

Spiritual Substantiation

Signifying an empirical basis for one’s works may have also enhanced their spiritual authority. David Morgan, a scholar of religious visual culture, writes that the process by which religious images render “truth” is by making covenants with spectators.⁶⁹ Historically, these covenants were based largely on matters of belief and authority of both the patron and the artist. However, on the heels of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, external factors increasingly became the basis for such covenants. One type of covenant is what Morgan terms the “authoritarian covenant.” This occurs when viewers are assured that “what they see is valid or trustworthy because it bears the approval of an acknowledged authority.”⁷⁰ Martin's paintings made appeals to numerous

⁶⁸ *Edinburgh Review* xlix, no. 98 (1829): 466.

⁶⁹ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), 105-08.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

external authorities, both spiritual and secular, as has been discussed. Both the textual citations in the pamphlets and the visual allusions to empirical data allowed Martin's works to make the authoritarian covenant with viewers.

Another covenant mentioned by Morgan, the “mimetic covenant,” is based on assuring viewers “that what they see is a reliable portrayal because it conforms to what they already know something looks like.”⁷¹ Martin's paintings also benefited from this type of covenant, as he carefully integrated known architectural forms into his imagined spaces. The British visual lexicon in the early nineteenth century contained numerous representations of the “Orient,” most significantly the watercolors and prints published in collected works such as William Hodges' *Select Views in India* (1788) and Thomas and William Daniells' *Oriental Scenery* (1808). In his paintings, Martin combined known Babylonian architectural forms with those from ancient India and Egypt depicted in the works of Hodges and the Daniells brothers (Figure 3.10-12). Martin carefully noted his sources of inspiration in his pamphlets: “The style of architecture, partaking of the Egyptian on the one hand, and of the most ancient Indian on the other, has been invented as the most appropriate for a city situated betwixt the two countries, and necessarily in frequent intercourse with them.”⁷² People familiar with the prototypical architectural features highlighted by William Hodges and the Daniells brothers—trabeated arches, ribbed capitals, palmiform columns—would have recognized the “real” cultural origins of Martin's “imagined” architectural spaces. The integration of such familiar architectural forms into historical scenes enhanced the ability of these images to make

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Martin, *Descriptive Catalogue of the Picture of the Fall of Nineveh*, 14.

covenants with viewers based on their conformity to already familiar “Oriental” forms. This in turn enabled the paintings to claim a type of religious “truth.”

Analogical Representation and Political Strategy

Operating analogically allowed artists to engage potent political ideas without suffering the consequences that often accompanied openly proclaimed political allegiances. Martin’s paintings connected with the apocalypse in part because religious preachers of the time often spoke about the apocalypse by analogy. Historian Susan Juster has written:

Rather than comment directly on political issues, many prophets preferred to play a kind of shell game with their audiences, hiding their convictions under one or another rhetorical diversion. A quick detour through the history of ancient Babylon might hold lessons about the evils of commercial emporiums today, or it might signal divine disfavor with current tyrants (the pope, certain emperors, prime ministers who overreached) or with lower class venality. The litany of disasters that typically comprised an apocalyptic sermon sometimes made it difficult to identify the primary danger facing today's Christians . . . it was safer to speak of evil in general rather than condemn specific individuals or acts.⁷³

While Martin was by all accounts not shy about his political opinions, by representing the apocalypse analogically he gave himself a degree of immunity that was needed in a commercial art world. Juster indicates the myriad political purposes that reference to the apocalypse could serve, and it is this flexibility that makes Martin’s paintings so interesting. Because apocalyptic narratives could signal a wide variety of political positions, the choice of the subject itself reveals very little. Only through a close examination of the historical context, including the possibilities for interpreting the

⁷³ Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution*, 140.

apocalypse, combined with a careful analysis of the images, can the range of meanings generated by Martin's paintings be understood.

Pre-Millennium vs. Post-Millennium

A key division among those in the early nineteenth century who professed a belief in the coming Christian millennium existed between two groups, commonly known as the pre-millennialists and the post-millennialists. By definition, all millennialists believed in the imminent thousand-year reign of peace, or the millennium. There was disagreement, however, between two camps regarding when Christ's second coming would occur in relation to that event. In 1829, the Reverend S. Madden put the matter succinctly: "The question is not *IS* the Lord to come again? For this, I believe no one doubts. The question is *when* will He come? Before, or after the millennium?"⁷⁴ This issue bitterly divided adherents and had significant political ramifications. As one early nineteenth-century writer said,

Various have been the conjectures among the professing church regarding that new dispensation of Christianity, which is termed the millennium. The gauntlet has been thrown down, and champions have entered the list on both sides, who claim victory, or even still protract the contest in the dark.⁷⁵

Before exploring the implications of this important "contest," it is necessary to first lay out the theology and assumed politics of each party.

Those who fell into the pre-millennial category believed that Christ's second coming and the apocalypse would be the catalyst for a thousand-year reign of peace

⁷⁴ Samuel A. M. Madden, *The Nature and Time of the Second Advent of Messiah, Considered* (Dublin, 1829).

⁷⁵ Frederick Religious Writer Sargent, *An Essay on the Personal and Pre-Millennial Advent of the Messiah* (London, 1833), B.

during the millennium. Generally, they are described as seeing the world as such a degenerate place that it would require the destructions foretold in the Book of Revelation in order to cleanse the world of its wickedness. Christ's coming would be key in that process. The pre-millennialists are said to have often focused on apocalyptic destruction, the sinfulness of the current world, and the hopelessness of gradually reforming society.⁷⁶ Many viewed them as fearful religious zealots, perhaps with radical political tendencies, who tended to see international warfare as a form of cleansing by the hand of God. Politics was believed to be fundamentally useless to them. Only personal righteousness could ensure salvation. "Why polish the brass on a sinking ship" has been the traditional interpretation of those in the pre-millennialist camp.

Conversely, post-millennialists have been characterized as having an inverse perspective on the world. They saw history making gradual progress and believed that through natural means the earth would move toward and eventually create a thousand years of millennial peace. From this theological perspective, Christ's coming would occur at the end of the millennium. The destructions foretold in the Book of Revelation were often interpreted metaphorically, therefore they tended to distance themselves from the idea of the apocalypse. Generally considered to be more moderate in their religious views, post-millennialists are often linked with political reforms that would enhance gradual progress toward the millennium. Characterized as fundamentally optimistic, post-millennialists saw the potential for world peace independent of any dramatic intervention by God. Most scholars agree that post-millennialism was the more orthodox

⁷⁶ Because John Martin painted scenes of destruction and upheaval, this is the ideological position he has been commonly linked with.

of the two positions in the early nineteenth century, even though it has almost entirely disappeared in Christian sects today.

This binary construction was a part of the early nineteenth-century discourse on the apocalypse and has continued to structure most of the studies of nineteenth-century millennialism. It certainly serves a certain scholarly purpose, but I believe it has clouded our understanding of the ways in which people conceived of the millennium. Many scholars have treated these categories as the rigid structures described by theologians and assumed that everyone had to fit inside one category or the other. Other scholars have recently begun to recognize the constraints of this binary construction.⁷⁷ Many people did not fit neatly into either category but held beliefs that incorporated elements of both the pre- and post-millennialist eschatologies.⁷⁸ British religious journalist Damian Mark Thompson has pointed out that

pre-millennialism and post-millennialism are sometimes treated by scholars as alternative beliefs separated by a vast the logical gulf; the reality is that they are often mixed up with each other and it is not uncommon for evangelical Christians to oscillate between a pessimistic pre-millennial scenario and an optimistic post-millennial one depending on their mood and circumstances.”⁷⁹

While the battle lines between the two camps may have been sharply drawn in the realm of theological debates, the situation was especially murky among common believers.

There, much more fluidity existed between the two extremes. Historian Robert Whalen

⁷⁷ See Damian Mark Thompson, *Waiting for Antichrist: Charisma and Apocalypse in a Pentecostal Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 59; Gribben and Stunt, eds., *Prisoners of Hope?: Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880*, 4; Gail E. Husch, *Something Coming: Apocalyptic Expectation and Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Painting* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2000), 21; McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, 64-5; Boyd Hilton, “Whiggery, Religion and Social Reform: The Case of Lord Morpeth,” *The Historical Journal* 37 (1994): 846.

⁷⁸ Thompson, *Waiting for Antichrist: Charisma and Apocalypse in a Pentecostal Church*, 59; Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1988), 16.

⁷⁹ Thompson, *Waiting for Antichrist: Charisma and Apocalypse in a Pentecostal Church*, 59.

has noted that self-proclaimed post-millennialists often had a mingled outlook, exhibiting “optimism and dour pessimism . . . catastrophe as well as triumph, satanic victories as well as the church triumphant, retrogression and defeat as much as human progress.”⁸⁰

The scholarly re-assessment of the pre-and post-millennial dynamic resulted in part from a close examination of key figures who actively professed their belief in the impending millennium and the ways in which they resisted categorization as either pre- or post-millennialists. According to historian Jack Fruchtman, the influential dissenting priest and theologian Joseph Priestly “believed that before the millennium a series of cosmically controlled, spectacular cataclysms would forewarn men of their impending doom and peril. But throughout his life, Priestly displayed a consistent optimism about the future.”⁸¹ Political reformer Thomas Spence, as another scholar has pointed out, “belonged in the mold of a scholarly post-millennialist who envisaged the millennium as arriving gradually through human action, but his tone and temper was that of a more apocalyptic pre-millennialist who believed that Christ’s advent would participate in an abrupt transformation.”⁸² The nineteenth-century minister and theologian James Bicheno has been described as “an optimistic post-millennialist with pre-millennialist hesitations” who believed the millennium would result “from a mixture of natural and supernatural causes.”⁸³ The ambivalence attributed to these prominent thinkers, who were immeasurably more familiar with formal apocalyptic theology than the average Christian, provides insight as to why the millennialist doctrine did not translate lucidly to the British

⁸⁰ Robert Kieran Whalen, “Millenarianism and Millennialism in America, 1790-1880” (Ph. D., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1985), 137.

⁸¹ Fruchtman, *Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-Century English Republican Millennialism*, 39.

⁸² McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, 64-5.

⁸³ Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s*, 48.

populace. As one author wrote in 1829 in relation to this neat division into two distinct theological camps, “There is such a diversity of opinion among this class of interpreters referred to commonly that it would be difficult to find any two of them who, in every particular, agreed.”⁸⁴

This structural reformulation dramatically alters the way visual representations of the apocalypse can be read. Whereas in the past, paintings of John Martin and his followers were often assumed to be pessimistic bastions of reactionary politics, this new appraisal of the historical context allows for a more nuanced view of the possible political associations of these paintings. Early modern historian Crawford Gribben points out, the categories of pre- and post-millennium inhibit scholars partially because “they do not address their range of social and cultural meanings that students of prophecy derive from their millennial systems.”⁸⁵ One of the key assumptions that has been challenged as a result of this scholarly reformulation regards the political associations of each group. In contrast to the rigid politics traditionally assumed to attend pre- and post-millennialist thinking, “in their activist phases, the various forms of millennial impulse spanned the total socio-political spectrum.”⁸⁶ Those traditionally characterized as pre-millennialists could just as easily see in the apocalypse a pattern and justification for revolutionary violence as they could a system of absolute order where God had ordained earthly rulers. Likewise, those defined as post-millennialists could just as easily see the progress of the world as justification for a *laissez faire* economic approach as they could see could see

⁸⁴ John Morison, “A Discourse on the Doctrine of the Millennium,” (London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1829), 16.

⁸⁵ Gribben and Stunt, eds., *Prisoners of Hope?: Aspects of Evangelical Millennialism in Britain and Ireland, 1800-1880*, 4.

⁸⁶ Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s*, 169.

the failures of the world as a means of justifying paternalistic intervention. In fact, historian Boyd Hilton's book *The Age of Atonement* asserts that if a certain politics should be ascribed as the norm for either group, it was the religiously zealous pre-millennialists in Parliament who tended to favor progressive political programs aimed at alleviating social ills while the post-millennialists exhibited general contentment with the direction of the world and felt little impetus for government intervention.⁸⁷ Hilton's analysis seems to suggest that what might be called "apocalyptic progressivism" was not only evident in society but part of mainstream thought.

John Martin and Apocalyptic Progressivism

The idea that believers in an imminent apocalypse involving widespread destruction might ally with radical political groups is by no means new. In fact, by choosing to represent the apocalypse, an artist was at the very least opening the door for association with radical politics due to the violent nature of the apocalyptic prophecies.⁸⁸ With a view toward the connotative breadth of the idea of the apocalypse, however, much more than violence might be suggested through its representation. This new scholarly approach to the apocalypse opens up the possibility that the paintings might be subtly promoting progressive political reforms. Boyd Hilton examined the voting records of members of Parliament known to be in favor of pre-millennialist ideas and found that they tended to support legislation to alleviate social ills. This analysis provided the basis

⁸⁷ Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*, 15, 16, 17, 98, 212.

⁸⁸ See Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 224; McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840*, 68; Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s*, 169.

for what I am calling “apocalyptic progressivism.” Perhaps no historical figure provides a more poignant example of this phenomenon than the painter John Martin.

Martin’s biography suggests a figure who did not live in fear of impending destruction, despite the appearance of his paintings. Rather, Martin was known to have progressive political opinions. No biographical detail stands in sharper contrast to his paintings of urban destruction than his devotion to designing social improvement projects. Following his artistic and financial success in the 1820s, he spent much of his career on projects aimed at alleviating the various problems afflicting London due to the onset of industrialization. From 1827 to 1850 Martin submitted over ten proposals to Parliament on the following projects: how to efficiently transport the sewage being poured into the Thames, both to maintain the cleanliness of the river and to transport the sewage to outlying agricultural areas; how to purify the air in coal mines and simultaneously reduce accidental mine explosions; and how to improve railway transportation within London, including the proposition of an underground railroad (Figure 3.13). Martin’s son Leopold recalled the “oft repeated cry” of his father: “Oh, my boy, if only I had been an engineer . . . Instead of benefitting a few only, I should have added to the comfort, prosperity, and health of mankind in general.”⁸⁹ Unfortunately for Martin, the rejection of each plan, largely due to monied interests, resulted in his near bankruptcy in 1837. He invested extensive time in these enterprises, and while financial reward may have been a hope, he seems to have been primarily motivated by a desire to improve the world at large. Either way, these actions hardly seem concomitant with someone who expected imminent destruction.

⁸⁹ Mary Lucy Pendered, *John Martin, Painter, His Life and Times* (New York: E.P. Dutton and company, 1924), 200.

Martin's known political opinions tended to defy conservative politics and instead favor republican reform. Friends referred to Martin as "a radical reformer" who "took violently to politics."⁹⁰ In perhaps the most famous non-artistic episode of his life, Martin hissed loudly at a public concert in 1820 when the anthem "God save the King" was played.⁹¹ He frequently hosted politically tinged gatherings of artists and writers in his home, attended by "a class about as radical as the artist" himself.⁹² On one occasion William Godwin, author of *Political Justice* and forerunner of numerous anarchist and socialist organizations, was part of the debate. During their discussion, Godwin played the role of the conservative voice in contrast to Martin's radical republicanism.⁹³ In his *Thames and Metropolitan Improvement Plans* submitted to Parliament, Martin mentioned how the lack of adequate employment among the laboring classes altered what should be the "wealth of a nation" and caused it "to be regarded as a real evil."⁹⁴ In contrast to the prevailing sentiment of blaming the penury of the poor on their behavior, Martin's criticism of the system aligned with radical sentiments of the time. Some of the most glowing reviews of Martin's works were published by *The Examiner*, the literary home of radical poets and a paper founded with the goal of producing Parliamentary reform.⁹⁵ In conjunction with Martin's pursuit of social improvements, his known political opinions and associations seem disconnected from the traditional characterizations of avowed pre-millennialists.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 176.

⁹¹ Ibid., 175.

⁹² Thomas Balston, *John Martin, 1799-1854, His Life and Works* (London: G. Duckworth, 1947), 164.

⁹³ Charles Macfarlane and John F. Tattersall, *Reminiscences of a Literary Life ... With an Introduction by John F. Tattersall* (London: John Murray, 1917), 98-99.

⁹⁴ John Martin, "Thames and Metropolitan Improvement Plan," (1846), 1.

⁹⁵ Elizabeth Gilmore Ed Holt, *Triumph of Art for the Public: The Emerging Role of Exhibitions and Critics* (Washington DC: Decatur House Press, 1980), 200.

While the ideas of apocalypse and millennium exist perpetually in relation to one another, the connections between the apocalypse and progressive politics are much less natural. As mentioned before, millennium simply “provided a common language and set of images and concepts,” but it lacked any agreed upon political meaning.⁹⁶ That said, some scholars have attempted to draw lines around the political possibilities of certain brands of millennialism. For instance, W. H. Oliver has claimed that

the millennial scheme is marked off from ideas of progress, in which human effort rather than external agency effect the change from bad to good. Accordingly, progressivist programs are rational rather than apocalyptic in nature, for they require some calculation as to the relation of means and goals.⁹⁷

This statement seems logical, but in essence that is where it is faulty. When dealing with matters of religion, logic and rationality do not always provide the proper framework for attempting to ascertain how ideas were translated into political action. While to scholars it may seem like utilizing apocalyptic representations for progressive political means is totally irrational, it is anachronistic to assume that believing Christians in the early nineteenth century felt the same way. Evidence exists that such thoughts did occur and we must therefore seek to understand how they came about and what kind of impact they had, especially as regards art.

Conceiving of Apocalyptic Progressivism

One of the most popular car bumper stickers in the early twenty-first century in the United States was based on a statement made by the Reverend Jerry Fallwell: “In

⁹⁶ Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780-1850*, 6.

⁹⁷ Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s*, 23.

case of rapture, this car will be unmanned.”⁹⁸ This slightly comical, yet deadly serious take on impending apocalypse reveals something interesting regarding many Christians’ thoughts on the prospect of a future based on the Book of Revelation: it is more about eventual peace, protection, and salvation than about death and destruction. Despite the violence that owners of these bumper stickers espouse, they essentially believe that they will “watch the tribulation and the desolation of the earth from a front row seat in heaven.”⁹⁹ The notion of rapture, or the belief that the righteous will be caught up into heaven and immune from the destructions described in The Book of Revelation, had its roots in the early nineteenth century. Art historian Gail Husch summarizes this fundamentally hopeful dimension of the apocalypse:

The word “apocalypse” and its variants mean much more than the utter and cataclysmic destruction they have come to connote. An apocalypse, rather than a violent end, is a revelatory instance of extreme transformation and transition: the destruction of the old world entrapped in time and the creation of a new, timeless one . . . Despite the negative implications of “apocalyptic” in the popular mind, it is a fundamentally hopeful system of belief: however terribly it begins, a new and better order in which righteousness finds its reward will be realized by the end. Intrinsic to all apocalyptic belief is the promise of a millennium, a period of justice, harmony, and order, to be experienced at some point along the predetermined path of history.¹⁰⁰

Husch astutely notes that in order to understand the apocalypse properly, it must be conceived of in perpetual relation to the millennium. The eighteenth-century author Thomas Burnett wrote that “you may as well open a lock without a key as interpret the

⁹⁸ See Daniel Wójcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 42-3.

⁹⁹ Jason Byassee, “What’s Behind ‘Left Behind’,” *The Christian Century* (2004): 22.

¹⁰⁰ Husch, *Something Coming: Apocalyptic Expectation and Mid-Nineteenth-Century American Painting*, 13-14.

apocalypse without the millennium.”¹⁰¹ While the apocalypse suggests destruction, believers view that destruction as a door that must be passed through in order to obtain a higher form of existence where peace, prosperity, equality, and righteousness exist throughout the world. Thus, viewing Martin’s works simply as pessimistic views of future destruction does not account for the range of possible meanings they could have generated.

An examination of early nineteenth-century religious texts makes the links between apocalypse and millennium especially apparent. Preachers frequently made the optimistic aspect of the apocalypse clear in sermons and published works. In an 1835 compendium of various works on the second coming of Christ, a Reverend asked rhetorically,

Does Jesus come to annihilate or renovate the earth? - to destroy or restore all things? The common opinion is that he comes to burn up the world, and to consume it forever. The view which we learn from God’s word to take is directly the opposite of this. We are led to believe that Christ’s Second Advent is for the purpose of restoring all things to their original order, beauty, and perfection –to regain Eden for his church.¹⁰²

While “order, beauty, and perfection” are hardly the terms one would use to describe the apocalyptic paintings of John Martin, when a more precise understanding of theology is integrated into the analysis, the themes he depicted were associated with those very ideas. In another sermon, originally preached in 1800 and then published in 1821, the speaker pointed out that consideration of the apocalypse was simply a matter of perspective:

¹⁰¹ Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth ... With ... The Author's Defence of the Work, from the Exceptions of Mr. Warren, and the Examination of Mr. Keil. And an Ode to the Author by Mr. Addison* (Glasgow: R. Urie, 1753), 2: 111.

¹⁰² William L. L. D. Anderson and Gerard Thomas Hon Noel, *A Brief Enquiry into the Prospects of the Church of Christ in Connexion with the Second Advent of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (Glasgow, 1835), 17.

The same judgments, which consume and destroy the wicked, purify and refine the Saints. The same calamities which distress and ruin the public enemies of Christ, prove highly beneficial to his church. To the former, they come from an angry God, executing on them the curse of the law, from which they take occasion to sin the more, and to blaspheme the God of heaven; but to the latter they proceed from a reconciled God, attended with his blessing, by which their holiness and spiritual exercise are increased, and on account of which they celebrate his praise.¹⁰³

This preacher connected the destructive events of the apocalypse to its positively transformative nature in a very intimate manner. In this passage, the exact events which consume and destroy some people simultaneously purify and refine others. Thus, when representing what appears to be scenes of overt destruction, one must take into account that theologically those destructive events may also be seen as “highly beneficial” as they purify and refine the righteous. The reality of the millennium meant that numerous religious spectators might have invested scenes of apocalyptic destruction with a vastly different set of associations and meanings than would be had by the non-religious viewer. While those meanings are by no means exclusive to the works of art in question, they deserve to be accounted for and explored.

Independent of the relation between progressive politics, pre-millennial apocalyptic thought, and John Martin’s biography, the paintings themselves allude to the idea of apocalyptic progressivism. Just as the apocalypse has its utopian mirror image in the millennium, virtually every scene of biblical destruction was associated with the idea of deliverance as well. Martin chose subjects that corresponded to those episodes preachers and theologians cited from the Bible when describing the apocalypse and

¹⁰³ “The Fall of Babylon the Great by the Agency of Christ and through the Instrumentality of His Witnesses: In Four Discourses”, (Glasgow: Young and Gallie, 1821), 14.

millennium. Moreover, these were the same subjects preachers used to emphasize the idea of deliverance amidst destruction.

In his landmark *The Typology of Scripture* published in 1847, in a section on “Noah and the Flood,” Patrick Fairbairn noted the general principle of the story of Noah: “the accomplishment of salvation necessarily carries along with it a work of destruction.”¹⁰⁴ After describing the “necessary connection” between destruction and deliverance, Fairbairn explained that this principle is rehearsed on multiple occasions in the bible:

This principle of salvation and destruction, which found such a striking exemplification in the deluge, has been continually appearing anew in the history of God’s dealings among men. It appeared, for example, at the period of Israel’s redemption from Egypt, when a way of escape was opened for the people of God by the overthrow of Pharaoh and his host; and again, at the era of the return from Babylon, when the destruction of the enemy and the oppressor broke asunder the bands with which the children of the covenant were held captive.¹⁰⁵

The narratives mentioned by Fairbairn, including the flood, Moses in Egypt, and the deliverance of Israel from Babylon, became standard bearers of this principle, and numerous other preachers and theologians of the day echoed the stories and their themes. In a sermon from 1835, the preacher cited Noah and the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Egypt under Pharaoh, and Babylon with Daniel as scriptural examples of warning preceding destruction, which also facilitated deliverance for a select group.¹⁰⁶ Martin represented these key narratives on massive canvases no fewer than ten times over the

¹⁰⁴ Patrick Fairbairn, *Typology of Scripture: Two Volumes in One* (1854; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 272.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 274-75.

¹⁰⁶ William L. L. D. Anderson and Gerard Thomas Noel, *Extracts on Prophecy, Chiefly the Approaching Advent and Kingdom of Christ, from the Writings of Burgh, Anderson, Noel, Etc* (Glasgow, 1835), 3-4.

course of his career—three paintings of Babylon, two of the Israelites in Egypt, four of the deluge, and one of Sodom and Gomorrah—painting six of them between 1819 and 1832. Taking into account Martin’s other types of work as a professional painter, it would be fair to say that these subjects occupied the majority of his attention during the height of his popularity.

Deliverance or Destruction?

The possibility of deliverance amidst destruction was believed to be real by most Christians. However, two pertinent questions remained. First, was Britain destined either to be destroyed in the manner of the Babylonians or delivered in the manner of the Israelites in Egypt? Britain was linked metaphorically in textual sources to both the punished Babylonians and the delivered Israelites, so each perspective was asserted by different individuals. Then, within this framework, another question persisted. If Britain was not destined to be either Babylon or Ancient Israel, what would determine its fate? In other words, if deliverance was something to be earned through human agency, what factors would deliverance be predicated upon?

Turning to the works of John Martin and his followers, I want to consider how they map onto these questions. The paintings tended to maintain metaphorical ambiguity in regard to whether Britain was Babylon or Israel, as each society was depicted on large-scale canvases during the period in question. However, they more directly addressed the second question, how deliverance might be obtained. The paintings suggested the means by which Britons could ensure their role as followers of Moses rather than Pharaoh. Some Christians believed that personal righteousness offered the only hope for

deliverance. Martin's paintings, in contrast, proposed a collective type of salvation that hinged on enacting certain social and political institutions rather than on individual repentance.

In the following chapters I will closely analyze these paintings of destruction and deliverance with a view toward establishing what factors might characterize the representation of a protected or a destroyed society. I begin by looking at the paintings of urban destruction represented by the ancient cities of Babylon and Nineveh, then conclude with an examination of the works involving the Israelite deliverance from Egypt. Taken together, Martin's representations of ancient Babylon, Nineveh, and Egypt suggest that government intervention is a central component in securing the protection of God. They ascribe the downfall of these societies to financial excess and reveal problems to be social rather than individual in nature. The pictures also position the head of the government as the one possessing the power to heed the warnings of God and solve social problems. Because this conjunction of social degradation and government responsibility was the basis of the Christian reformist movement, Martin's paintings can be seen to have encouraged political reforms. And his representations of cataclysmic destruction may have indeed supported the apocalyptic progressive viewpoint.

Chapter 4

The Wounded City: The Politics of Urban Destruction in John Martin's "Mesopotamian Trilogy"

In 1827, two of the most noted artists in Europe, John Martin and Eugène Delacroix, made the same choice. One located in Britain, the other in France, each elected to paint the same story for their next large-scale paintings—the destruction of the ancient city of Nineveh and its infamous leader Sardanapalus. It was a well-known tale in the early nineteenth century due to its inclusion in the Old Testament and its popular updating by romantic writers such as Lord Byron. This story traversed the realms of history, religion, and popular literature. The decision by these two artists to depict this subject at the same historical moment is certainly striking, though the ways in which the paintings and artists diverged are even more arresting.

According to most art historians, the exhibition of Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* marked a point of departure in his career as well as more broadly in the trajectory of nineteenth-century French art (Figure 4.1).¹ Delacroix had exhibited large

¹ For a broad overview of the production, exhibition, and reception of *The Death of Sardanapalus* see Jack J. Spector, *Delacroix: The Death of Sardanapalus* (London: Allen Lane, 1974); Also, Elisabeth A. Fraser, "Delacroix's Sardanapalus: The Life and Death of the Royal Body," *French Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003). For its place in the history of art, various surveys position the painting as a key moment in the transition from classicism to romanticism; for example, see Ian L. Donnachie and Carmen Lavin, *From Enlightenment to Romanticism: 1780-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, published in association with the Open University, 2004), 2: 71; Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: The*

scale works before, but now work s signifies his entrance onto the stage of artistic notoriety better than *Sardanapalus*. Furthermore, this work has come to represent the public inauguration of the genre of “Orientalist” subjects that would continue to influence French art throughout the nineteenth century. Yet for all its art historical significance, Delacroix’s painting was not received warmly at the time of its original exhibition. *The Death of Sardanapalus* garnered “unusually terse and negative” criticism from the artist’s supporters, critics, and the public at large. It was not purchased by the state, unlike his previous large-scale paintings, and following the close of the Salon it disappeared from the public view until almost a century later in 1921.² At the time of its original exhibition that painting was considered by most to be a sub-standard work.

The critical reception and fortunes of Martin’s *The Fall of Nineveh* were the inverse of those of Delacroix’s painting (Figure 4.2-3). His public popularity was so great at this point that he had the freedom to exhibit outside official art exhibitions, and *The Fall of Nineveh* was presented as the showcase painting in a one-man exhibition organized by Martin.³ The painting garnered almost universal praise from the public and critics alike and continued to attract positive attention over the course of the next decade. Following its exhibition, Napoleon’s brother Joseph Bonaparte viewed the painting in Martin’s studio, an encounter that prompted Joseph Bonaparte to send Martin a portrait of himself in his previous position as King of Spain, along with a pair of candlesticks designed by Cellini which had originally been a gift from Napoleon himself.⁴ At the request of the Premier to King William IV, Martin accompanied the painting to

Western Perspective, 13 ed.(Cengage Learning, 2009), 2:622-23; Stephen F. Eisenman and Thomas E. Crow, *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002), 79-80.

² Fraser, “Delacroix's Sardanapalus: The Life and Death of the Royal Body,” 317.

³ Thomas Balston, *John Martin, 1799-1854, His Life and Works* (London,: G. Duckworth, 1947), 106-07.

⁴ Leopold Martin, “Reminiscences of John Martin,” *The Newcastle Observer*, February 16 1889.

Buckingham Palace where it was viewed by the king.⁵ The painting was subsequently sent to the 1833 Salon in Brussels, where it was purchased by the Belgian government for 2000 guineas. Martin was immediately elected a member of the Belgian Royal Academy and the king knighted him after the Order of Leopold.⁶

The money, fame, and status John Martin attained as a result of *The Fall of Nineveh* were countered by the meteoric decline of those same things that began during the second half of the nineteenth century. At its lowest point in the 1920's, when Delacroix's painting was meanwhile being revived and reevaluated, Martin's huge canvas sold for merely four pounds at auction.⁷ And whereas *The Death of Sardanapalus* has since elicited numerous scholarly studies and is often reproduced in art history survey texts, Martin's work has attracted very little scholarly attention. Last recorded in the Royal Collection of Cairo, its current whereabouts are unknown, and it has never been reproduced in full color.

The divergent histories of these two works are matched by the divergent artistic strategies employed in each painting. These artists interpreted the same narrative in entirely different ways. Delacroix painted a congested interior space composed of large dramatic figures, chief among them the heartless king who disinterestedly watches the self-initiated destruction of his closest confidants, concubines, and commodities. Martin painted an exterior view of the immense city, pulling the viewpoint back so that the spectator is presented with a minuscule figure of Sardanapalus. Whereas Delacroix represented the story of a man's destruction, Martin subordinated the individual's downfall to the destruction of an entire society. In contrast to Delacroix's painting, in

⁵ Leopold Martin, "Reminiscences of John Martin," *The Newcastle Observer*, March 2 1889.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Balston, *John Martin, 1799-1854, His Life and Works*, 253.

Martin's conception Sardanapalus' personal decision and death cannot be divorced from the annihilation of the city at large. The intense violence of Delacroix's scene is dispersed in Martin's scene across a sprawling urban landscape, where clouds of flames recede into a seemingly infinite distance, great walls break down as invading armies pour through, and the wholesale massacre of an entire race of people is visualized.

These works provide a glimpse into the precarious processes by which certain paintings continue to persist within contemporary culture. I have little interest in attacking or endorsing the logic behind those processes, yet I do feel it important to acknowledge how they might obscure the realities of how the works operated in their original contexts. Because my research aims to reconstruct the meanings the works could have conveyed at the time of their original exhibition, the status of the painting in the early nineteenth century is more significant than its status today. In another contrast to Delacroix's painting, Martin's work stood at the end of an era – both in relation to his public acclaim and his method of representation. Martin painted until his death in the 1850s, but never again did he reach the level of public notoriety he experienced in the 1820s. Yet despite his decline in fame, at the time of its exhibition *The Fall of Nineveh* was considered by most to be a “noble and magnificent picture” that produced in all who viewed it “the most august and authentic inspiration.”⁸

John Martin and the Decimated City

1828 marked the end of a decade in which the subject of urban destruction occupied almost the whole of Martin's attention. From 1819 to 1828 he produced six

⁸ “On the Genius of John Martin,” *Arnold's Magazine of the Fine Arts*, December 1833, 102; Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 2d ed. (London: R. Bentley, 1833), 2:261.

massive canvases on the theme, along with inspiring a number of followers to paint similar subjects in a similar style. Of these six paintings, three of them share a striking kinship: *The Fall of Babylon* (1819), *Belshazzar's Feast* (1821), and *The Fall of Nineveh* (1828). What has been referred to as Martin's "Mesopotamian Trilogy," these works share features that permit and even encourage a kind of collective interpretation. They were often viewed alongside one another by spectators. Martin's one-man exhibitions positioned new works alongside his previous paintings and the works were juxtaposed in his illustrated Bible which contained mezzotints of each painting. Due to the coherence of their subjects, their ideological implications, and their physical proximity in the early nineteenth century, I have chosen to analyze them collectively. Most importantly, by considering them in dialogue with one another, the nature of the conclusions that can be drawn regarding their reception expands.

All of the paintings in the Mesopotamian Trilogy generated similarly enthusiastic responses from the British public when they were unveiled. In 1819 *The Fall of Babylon* was the highlight of the British Institution exhibition and prompted the following review in *The Examiner*:

The spectators crowd around it, some with silence, some with exclamatory admiration; sometimes very near to look at the numerous small objects that cannot be distinguished at a distance, sometimes further off to feast upon the grandeur of the whole; leaving it, but still thrilling with the strange and felicitous expression, coming back to look at it again, after having looked at most of the other pictures with an absent mind, like a lover who is but half attentive to other women in a delicious reverie on the superior charms of her who has the keeping of his heart.⁹

The reviewer's melodramatic description effectively captured the tension between the breadth of emotional responses to Martin's painting and the common "thrill" that

⁹ "Fine Arts," *The Examiner*, Sunday, February 7 1819, 92.

occurred to those who viewed Martin's works felt. According to the reviewer, this painting singlehandedly answered "the question as to the capabilities of our countrymen in the superior walks of art."¹⁰ Martin exhibited *Belshazzar's Feast* two years later, in 1821, to great public acclaim, as discussed in Chapter Two. The extension of its exhibition run, the railing built around the work, the exhibition of it in the shop on the Strand, its tour around Britain, and the diorama painted after it contributed to the fame of John Martin. Following the multi-phased exhibition of *Belshazzar's Feast*, Martin's popularity reached such heights that he began to bypass official exhibitions, choosing instead to hold one-man shows. Turner's biographer lamented the fact that when Turner decided to open a private gallery of his own work, he failed to attract much attention because Martin's solo exhibition had opened at the same time.¹¹ In 1828, when Martin exhibited *The Fall of Nineveh* in a solo exhibition, people were reported to have fainted at its very sight.¹²

The sensational reactions to these paintings might cause us to assume that they lacked substance or depth and instead played on public desire for sheer entertainment. However, by engaging the discourse of the apocalypse, these paintings became implicitly embroiled in significant political debates, as suggested in the previous chapter. Martin employed the biblical cities of Nineveh and Babylon as types for the future apocalypse and exemplified through them what might happen if cities failed to heed the warnings of God. Yet these were not merely empty scenes of catastrophe since they also suggested certain factors that could be held responsible for the destruction of the cities. Martin emphasized particular aspects of ancient urban societies as root causes of their downfall:

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A. J. Finberg, *The Life of J. M. W. Turner, R. A.*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 274.

¹² Max Adams, "John Martin and the Prometheans," *History Today* 56, no. 8 (2006): 42.

financial excess, luxury, and pagan worship. By employing various compositional strategies and visual mechanisms, Martin's works indicated that such urban problems transcended any single individual and were fundamentally social in nature. At the same time they also positioned the individual at the head of government as the only one possessing the overarching ability to potentially change the course of society and provide protection from God's looming wrath.

Martin's Mesopotamian Trilogy

The exhibition of John Martin's *The Fall of Babylon* in 1819 marked the beginning of a decade in which scenes of catastrophe proliferated throughout the British art world (Figure 4.4). Though he had gained something of a reputation prior to this time, the overwhelmingly positive public response to his first Babylon painting caused an "enraptured" Martin to compare his emotions to Wellington's after having defeated Napoleon.¹³ *The Fall of Babylon* depicts the moment when the invading Persian forces crashed through the city walls via the Euphrates River. In the foreground, Martin created a pyramid of figures that mirrors the immense pyramid-like structures directly behind them, identified by Martin as the temple of Belus and the infamous Tower of Babel. The woeful Babylonian king Belshazzar collapses at the forefront of the scene flailing his arms, a gesture revealing both his terror and recognition that the punishment of the enslaved Israelites comes from God. Belshazzar is flanked on his right by a group of his advisors and priests, at least three of whom have knives drawn and prepare to kill the king before he is captured by the invading Persians. Below the king and to his left are the

¹³ Balston, *John Martin, 1799-1854, His Life and Works*, 49; Mary Lucy Pendered, *John Martin, Painter, His Life and Times* (New York: E.P. Dutton and company, 1924), 89.

women of the king's harem who react in diverse ways: one shudders away from the king; another attempts to ward off his attackers; a third grasps a child and stares at the invading forces; the final one lies in a distraught heap of drapery on the ground. The middle ground of the painting is occupied by the forces invading the city. In gross detail Martin depicted the massacre of the city through literally thousands of tiny figures raising swords in the air, straining to draw back bows, riding chariots, and astride the backs of elephants. On the right side of the canvas Martin painted the famous "hanging gardens" overlooking the destruction perpetrated below.

Despite the thousands of tiny figures in the painting, and the slightly larger group surrounding the king, the real actor in the painting is the city itself. The city dominates the scene and seems to recede into almost infinite pictorial space. Martin's version of Nineveh is comprised mainly of broad horizontal architectural forms. The city rises to significant heights, framed by repeated rows of colonnades that project from the front to the back of the canvas. In the foreground, thick columns are decorated with intertwining bands and flat capitals. In the middle ground, an immense bridge spanning nearly half of the eight-foot width of the canvas leads the eye to the far side of the river that bisects the city. The detailed foreground architecture is transformed into rows upon rows of columns and colonnades that wrap around the base of the great towers and leads the viewer's eye into the depths of a sprawling urban vista.

The city is rivaled only by natural elements that seem on the verge of consuming it. Nature actually destroys the city even though the invading Persian army is depicted as perpetrating the violence. In the center of the scene clouds violently devour the tower of Babel from below and above while a sharp strike of lightning cuts across the center,

disemboweling that great emblem of human folly. Layered clouds frame the entire scene in a Turner-esque vortex, albeit with greater attention to detail and narrative action than characterized Turner's paintings. It seems as if an inverted chasm, or perhaps the gaping mouth of God himself, has opened up to devour the wicked city.

Following the success of *The Fall of Babylon*, Martin decided to paint what filmmakers today would call a "prequel"—a scene depicting the night *before* the fall of Babylon. *Belshazzar's Feast* was Martin's most popular painting and, as previously discussed, possibly the most widely viewed painting of the first half century in Britain (Figure 4.5).¹⁴ Essentially, *Belshazzar's Feast* turned John Martin's name into "the highest pitch of celebrity" during the 1820s.¹⁵ In some respects, the narrative required Martin to reverse many of the visual components that made his *Fall of Babylon* painting so successful. Instead of an expansive city, the story is set inside a banquet hall. Instead of violent overthrow, the subject revolves around a spiritually dramatic moment when the hand of God wrote words of warning on a wall. Despite these differences, Martin employed the same compositional structure utilized in *The Fall of Babylon*. He created what is perhaps the largest interior space ever represented on canvas by situating Belshazzar's feast in an immense open-air palace with a large central courtyard. This open-air plan facilitated Martin's predilection for deep spaces because the spectator's eye could catch glimpses of Babylon outside of the palace, while the architectural forms pull the viewer's eye into the building's deep recesses. Each side of the courtyard is flanked

¹⁴ For data, see Robin Hamlyn, *John Martin 1789-1854: Belshazzar's Feast, 1820* (London: The Tate Gallery, 1989).

¹⁵ "Varieties - Martin - the Historical Painter," *Newcastle Magazine*, January 1823, 46.

by massive rows of columns that likewise guide the eye into the background, which Martin claimed to have carefully calculated as being a mile deep.¹⁶

In order to balance the demands of narrative coherence with such a dramatic presentation of space and architecture, Martin bracketed off the foreground setting by elevating it above the courtyard below. This compositional solution emphasized the narrative by creating a contrast of scale between the foreground and middle-ground figures. At the center of the scene, standing behind a luxuriously decorated low lying table, stands the black-robed figure of Daniel. He dramatically gestures with his right hand toward the glowing writing emanating above the row of columns on the left hand side of the canvas—the remnant of the hand of God declaring “Thou art weighed in the balances, and thou art found wanting.”¹⁷ The figure of the King Belshazzar is located to the right of Daniel, highlighted by his pinkish robes and royal crown. Belshazzar strides away from the blinding light, an act of cowardice that is emphasized by a white-clad woman futilely clinging to his robe. Above the figure of the king sits a large golden menorah, reminding the viewer of the objects the Babylonians had stolen from the temple when they captured the Jews. The rest of the foreground is filled with clusters of figures in various states of shock, dismay, fear, and curiosity at the sight of the glowing text.

The lower level of the open courtyard, shown in the middle-ground, is filled with masses of party guests. At the center sits a golden statue of a human figure intertwined with a snake flanked by burning fires. Thousands of minute figures bow before the flames, transforming the scene into a mass pagan ritual. On the outer sides of the hall, Martin painted two long rows of torch-lit banquet tables that extend into the far reaches

¹⁶ John Martin, “A Description of the Picture Belshazzar's Feast Painted by Mr. J. Martin Which Gained the Highest Premium at the British Institution,” (London: J. Robins and Co. Albion Press, 1825).

¹⁷ Daniel 5:27

of the hall, each appearing to seat thousands of guests. The open courtyard is outlined by multiple groupings of columns, decorated walls, and even more figures that stand upon the upper levels of the palace. At the far end of the courtyard are a series of trabeated arches that frame the deep recesses of the building which contain even more diminishing tables, guests, arches, columns, and golden statues.¹⁸ Outside of the palace, Martin painted a giant stepped pyramid, itself dwarfed by the immense Tower of Babel that ascends beyond the frame of the canvas.

Martin's Mesopotamian Trilogy, particularly *Belshazzar's Feast*, has received more scholarly attention than any of his other works.¹⁹ A recently proposed interpretation of *Belshazzar's Feast* sees it as a metaphor for the excesses and abuses perpetrated by King George IV in 1821, specifically in regard to what came to be known as "the Queen Caroline affair."²⁰ When King George IV ascended to the throne in 1820, there was a question as to the role of his estranged wife Caroline, who had been living abroad for many years. Caroline confronted George by returning to London and attempting to claim her title as queen. Critics of the monarchy, mainly radicals and reformers, used the situation as a means of proclaiming the tyrannical nature of the king

¹⁸ The trabeated arch was formed by placing sequentially longer flat forms on top of columns, forming the shape of a jagged arch, yet lacking a keystone and true arch architectural principles.

¹⁹ The only exception might be Martin's mezzotints for his illustrated edition of *Paradise Lost* that have garnered the attention of Milton scholars and print collectors as well. See Marcia R. Pointon, *Milton & English Art* (Manchester, Manchester U.P., 1970); James Treadwell, "Blake, John Martin, and the Illustration of *Paradise Lost*," *Word and Image* 9 (1993); Ernest W. Sullivan, "Illustration as Interpretation: *Paradise Lost* from 1688-1807," in *Milton's Legacy in the Arts*, ed. Albert C. Labriola and Edward Sichi Jr. (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988); Kester Svendsen, "John Martin and the Expulsion Scene of *Paradise Lost*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 1 (1961); Beverly Sherry, "John Martin's Apocalyptic Illustrations to *Paradise Lost*," in *Milton and the Ends of Time*, ed. Juliet Cummins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Roland Mushat Frye, *Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts: Iconographic Tradition in the Epic Poems* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); Michael J. Campbell, *John Martin: Visionary Printmaker* (England: Campbell Fine Art in Association with York City Art Gallery, 1992); ———, *John Martin, 1789-1854: La Oscuridad Visible. Estampas I Dibujos De La Colección Campbell* (Madrid: Bancaja, 2006).

²⁰ Richard A. Burnett, "The Art of John Martin: Contexts and Sources of the Early Nineteenth-Century Taste for the Catastrophic in Art and Literature." (PhD Diss., University of Cambridge, 1995), 69-77.

and turned Caroline into a political symbol for the oppressed peoples of Britain.²¹

Caroline was never allowed to assume her position as queen, and died unexpectedly in 1821.²² The controversy surrounding the queen capped off three years of political instability that had witnessed a massacre at “Peterloo” and the so-called Cato Street conspiracy and this event captured the political attention of the nation.²³ The importance of this event in British history lends some justification to interpreting Martin’s painting as a metaphorical condemnation of the monarchy, with George IV cast in the role of

²¹ I frequently use the terms “radical” and “reformer” in almost interchangeable ways. This is not to discount the actual differences between reformers who generally promoted peaceful legislative programs and radicals who were more prone to view violent revolution as the most viable political program. The problem is that the actual lines between radicals and reformers were not clear, as members of the reformist community were often categorized as being a radical by their opponents, and members of each group would flow back and forth from being a radical to a reformer based on their audience and mood. Many who might be called radicals defined parliamentary reform as their political goal. For instance, Cobbett, who many considered to be a prototypical “radical,” often cited “reform” as his political goal. Also, following the dramatic events of 1819 and 1820 (Peterloo and Cato St.) many radicals morphed into reformers. Raphael West, the son of Benjamin West, told his father’s friend Joseph Farrington in December of 1820, “He spoke of the disturbed state of the county. He said parliamentary reform is the change called for, not revolution; that the Spencean Plan of dividing national property is not now spoken of; the Queen is used by the radicals to suit their purpose in keeping up discontent.” During this period there was no distinct line between radicals and reformers. Because of this dynamic, scholars tend to merge the terms as well. Thus, while I concede significant differences between the two groups, for the purposes of this paper I will use the terms roughly interchangeably. For examples of this interchangeability, see J. R. Dinwiddy, *Radicalism and Reform in Britain, 1780-1850* (London Hambledon Press, 1992); Joel H. Wiener, *Radicalism and Freethought in Nineteenth-Century Britain: The Life of Richard Carlile* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1983); Rachel Eckersley, “Of Radical Design: John Cartwright and the Redesign of the Reform Campaign, C.1800–1811,” *History* 89, no. 296 (2004); Naomi Churgin Miller, “John Cartwright and Radical Parliamentary Reform, 1808-1819,” *The English Historical Review* 83, no. 239 (1968). For more detail regarding the variations among the two terms, see J. C. D. Clark, “From ‘Radical Reform’ to ‘Radicalism’: The Framing of a New Critique ” in *English Society, 1660-1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics During the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

²² For a more detailed account of the affair, see John Stevenson, “The Queen Caroline Affair,” in *London in the Age of Reform*, ed. John Stevenson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977).

²³ The “Peterloo” massacre occurred in 1819 at an outdoor political demonstration on St. Peter’s field in Manchester, where the radical orator Henry Hunt was scheduled to speak. The meeting quickly turned violent as local authorities had called on the military to arrest Hunt and disperse the crowd. Fifteen people were killed in the chaos that ensued, with hundreds more being wounded. The massacre gained the name “Peterloo” in order to tie in linguistically with the battle of Waterloo in 1815. The Cato Street conspiracy was an attempt by a number of British radicals, including followers of Thomas Spence, to organize a mass assassination of all the British cabinet ministers and Prime minister in 1820. The plot was foiled and a number of the conspirators were hung to death in 1820. Though unsuccessful, it was emblematic of the level of radical activity at the beginning of the 1820s.

Belshazzar.²⁴ I would concur that the subject of Martin's painting was inherently political; the subject had been used multiple times during the Napoleonic wars to critique both foreign and domestic political figures (Figure 4.6-8). However, limiting the scope of interpretation to a single political event discounts the specific nature of Martin's condemnation. The monarch may be condemned in the painting due to the subject matter being represented, but the monarch is not positioned in the composition as the sole protagonist. Because of the emphasis on the city and society in the composition, the monarch can be seen to take a subordinate role in the scene. Rather than seeing this painting as a condemnation of a specific king or even the idea of monarchy, Martin's painting seems rather to condemn a *type* of ruler and society: it condemns an urban system that degenerates and culminates in total destruction. The guilt resides with both the King and his guests, or more specifically, with the social institutions that permitted the type of excesses on display in *Belshazzar's Feast*.

The Mystical Babylon and Modern London

In cities foul example on most minds

Begets its likeness. Rank abundance breeds

In gross and pamper'd cities sloth and lust,

And wantonness and gluttonness excess.

In cities, vice is hidden with most ease.²⁵

²⁴ No doubt Martin was both familiar with the event and had some radical political views, so it seems fair to say there may have been some who read Martin's works in this manner.

²⁵ William Cowper, "God Made the Country," in *The Idea of the City in Nineteenth-Century Britain* ed. Bruce Ivor Coleman (London: Routledge, 1973).

The idea of the city and its affect on urban dwellers was much debated during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Due to the industrially inspired influx of disenfranchised rural laborers, by the turn of the century London had become the largest city in the world and its population increased exponentially as the century wore on. In a single decade, from 1811 to 1821, London's population grew roughly 21%. This period also witnessed a number of large-scale construction projects designed to accommodate the rising population, including the Vauxhall, Waterloo, and Southwark bridges which were all constructed in a three year period from 1816 to 1819. This rapid urbanization caused many commentators to reflect on the idea of the city and to postulate its positive and negative effects, yet there was little consensus about this. Advocates of the new city pointed to the increase of national wealth as evidence of the superiority of London, while opponents of the city referenced its degrading effects on the national character.²⁶ One of the chief arguments against the city was its detrimental effect on the religiosity of the people. In his *Lectures on Politics*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge succinctly stated "in cities, God is everywhere removed from our sight."²⁷ This loss of religiosity was linked to numerous forms of depravity and degradation that seemed to reach new heights and depths with the massive growth of London. Many people began to wonder if the city itself was to blame.

Martin's depictions of ancient urban destruction resonated with the critiques of the modern city and encouraged spectators to view these Biblical cities as prototypes of London. A direct translation of this view was made by Martin's younger brother

²⁶ See Bruce Ivor Coleman, ed. *The Idea of the City in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 1973).

²⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lewis Patton, and Peter Mann, eds., *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion*, Bollingen Series Lxxv (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971), 225.

Jonathan, who produced a drawing of modern London as a slightly altered version of his brother's painting of *The Fall of Nineveh* (Figure 4.9). In Jonathan's version of the scene, Nineveh was cross-bred with modern London. The hybrid city followed the form of Nineveh as depicted by John Martin but bore the architectural landmarks and cultural symbols of London, including Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's Cathedral, British flags, and a massive floating lion's head. Jonathan Martin was clinically insane and it may be possible to attribute this drawing solely to his insanity, yet there is substantial evidence to suggest that it encapsulated how other spectators interpreted Martin's representations of ancient cities at the time.

Spectators and critics frequently noted the parallels between Martin's depicted cities and contemporary London, a connection fostered by the social discourses that metaphorically linked London to Babylon. The topos of London as a modern Babylon was extremely common in literature of the early nineteenth century, and in some sources the terms are used synonymously. For example, the author of a work entitled simply *Babylon the Great* wrote, "The most distinguishing circumstance about London, and the one in which it differs from every other place, is the universality of its character. In its confusion of tongues, of people, and of employments, it is Babylon; and in all its attributes it is '*Babylon the Great*'."²⁸ Visitors to London often referred to London as "the modern Babylon" in their writings.²⁹ This reference was prescient because not only did it tie London to the destroyed Babylon of the past but also to the "mystical Babylon" of the future presented in the Book of Revelations. According to St. John's vision, the "mystical Babylon" was "that great city which reigneth over the kings of the earth" prior

²⁸ Robert Mudie, *Babylon the Great: A Dissection and Demonstration of Men and Things in the British Capital* (London, 1825), 13.

²⁹ , *The European Magazine and London Review*, January 1825.

to the second coming of Christ.³⁰ Thus, drawing metaphorical connections between Babylon and London referenced the folly of the past which lead to widespread urban destruction, while also referring to the Book of Revelations and the prophesied city of the future which would mirror both the decadence and eventual destruction of the former Babylon.

The metaphorical connection between London and Babylon was also fostered by the types of architectural forms represented in Martin's paintings. His visions of ancient cities always privileged horizontal forms over vertical ones. Architecturally, London was known more for its breadth than its height. One visitor to London, after leaving the city, found a hill and looked back on it and remarked: "in an hour of riding I reached a hill... the sun started its rays... like a huge torch... the center of which rested directly on the metropolis of this world,—the immeasurable Babel which lay outstretched with its thousand towers, and its hundred thousand sins, its fog and smoke, its treasures and misery, further than the eye could reach."³¹ Other visitors to London during the 1820s echoed these sentiments, noting the long uniform streets that contributed to a sense of the "vastness and illimitable proportions" in the city.³² This sense of "immeasurability" was conveyed in Martin paintings through the employment of horizontal architectural forms that dominate the composition and emphasize the broad extent of Babylon and Nineveh. Repeated rows colonnades visually subordinated the tall towers and temples that tended

³⁰ Revelations 17:18

³¹ E.M. Butler, ed. *A Regency Visitor, the English Tour of Prince Puckler-Muskau Described in His Letters 1826-28* (London: Collins, 1957), 189.

³² Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. David Masson (London: A. & C. Black, 1896), 182. For further textual descriptions of London's appearance, along with analysis of how those descriptions connected with visual representations of the city, see Alex Potts, "Picturing the Modern Metropolis: Images of London in the Nineteenth Century," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 26 (1988): 29.

to appear in the background. The horizontally structured ancient cities of Martin's imagination mirrored architectural styles that pervaded in modern London.

Yet links with Babylon were not solely negative in the early nineteenth century. An entirely different set of connotations regarding Babylon inverted its negative associations with the modern city. Whatever its faults, Babylon encapsulated much of what modern London was striving to achieve in terms of its culture, scale, and world prowess. Reverend Thomas Maurice, an amateur historian and early curator of the British Museum, wrote in *Observations on the Ruins of Babylon* (1816), "the more we reflect on the majestic structures raised at Babylon, and the nature of the ground on which they were erected, the more must we be lost in admiration and astonishment at the wonderful mechanical skill, the indefatigable labour, and the unwearied patience, of the persevering architects."³³ Babylon was a paradoxical image for modern London because it encapsulated the greatness of an ancient imperial city while also demonstrating the danger of undertaking a similar imperial project. One art historian has noted that during this period Babylon

was a place that symbolized material wonder and tumultuous destruction; a city whose splendor was its downfall. Babylon and Imperial Rome were indices of London's greatness and also warnings of the dangers of hubris. These great trading centers and capitals of empires were brought down by luxury, sensuality and an excessive indulgence in and worship of the commodity.³⁴

This tension in the early nineteenth-century discourse on Babylon alerts us to the need to consider possible allusions to the positive side of Babylon in Martin's paintings. Did Martin's works wholeheartedly condemn the idea of the city and bind it to inevitable

³³ Thomas Maurice, *Observations Connected with Astronomy and Ancient History ... On the Ruins of Babylon* (London: J. Murray, 1816), 73.

³⁴ Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 2-3.

destruction? Or did they offer a different vision of the city which might reveal the glories of ancient Babylon? Because the paintings focus on urban destruction, few scholars have felt compelled to search for any positive connotations of the city in Martin's visions of Babylon and Nineveh. However, evidence of Martin's commitment to urban improvements, and some of his other paintings, suggest that the situation was more complex than it might at first seem.

The City of God

One of the most fascinating aspects of John Martin's personal life was his near abandonment of artistic projects at the height of his career in favor of designing metropolitan improvement plans for London. Martin's plans were aimed at alleviating urban problems through the design of effective systems for sewage disposal and mass transportation while simultaneously acting to beautify London. One of his most ambitious projects was the "Thames Embankment Project," which intended to create a series of walkways and architectural spaces along the Thames both in and outside of London. As art historian William Feaver has noted, it was patterned after the urban spaces that Martin had created in the *Nineveh* and *Babylon* paintings. Feaver described the project as a series of

stately promenades enclosing wharves and docks, surpassing Wren's St. Paul's and Adam's Adelphi Terrace. Here for a toll on weekdays and free on Sundays, the public could experience a walk-through Martin. It would be magnificent, enduring, a bastion against nature, a wonder of the world, fit for future Martins to paint.³⁵

³⁵ William Feaver, ed. *John Martin 1789-1854: Artist, Reformer, Engineer* (Newcastle: Laing Art Gallery, 1970), 5.

There is a certain irony in a painter trying to alter physically the city he inhabits so as to make it mirror the city whose destruction he had recently painted, yet this relationship between the painted and built environment helps us understand the role that the city played in Martin's paintings. Though he represented the destruction of cities, he did not view the city as set on an inevitable path toward destruction. When his entire oeuvre of paintings is taken into account, the city appears to be situated in the midst of heavenly glory as much as in the midst of destruction.

Martin represented the appearance of heaven on a number of occasions, both in the original prints he executed and in major paintings he executed toward the end of his career. In each case an urban space was a key element of the place inhabited by God. In his illustrations to Milton's *Paradise Lost* from the mid-1820s, Martin depicted heaven in two scenes, *Satan Viewing the Ascent into Heaven* and *Heaven—Rivers of Bliss* (Figure 4.10-11). The scene of *Satan Viewing the Ascent into Heaven* is dominated by an immense staircase wrapped in heavenly clouds, which lead up into a point of blinding light; on the periphery of the light, Martin represented large architectural elements. *Heaven—Rivers of Bliss* pictures heaven as composed of an immense colonnade that holds thousands of spectators around a central harbor, along with a colossal city in the background (Figure 4.12). Even in paintings where Martin envisioned heaven as a landscape, as in his *The Celestial City and the Rivers of Bliss*, a floating city in the sky alludes to the urban component of heaven (Figure 4.13-14). Taken together, Martin's commitment to metropolitan improvement and his vision of heavenly urban spaces causes us to re-consider his representation of the city in paintings that depict its destruction.

The City as Victim

In *The Fall of Babylon* and *The Fall of Nineveh* there are multiple allusions to violence, but interpersonal violence is not depicted in graphic detail. People hold knives, draw bows, and distant armies clash, however there is no representation of actual violence among people. Instead, the violence represented is that perpetrated on the city. The most prominent architectural feature in *The Fall of Nineveh* is the sweeping bridge which twists across the center of the canvas, and the most violent part of the painting is the giant gash which marks the point where the invading armies ripped through its stone foundation. Waters gush through the newly created hole as out of severed arm. Behind this gaping wound the rest of the city burns brightly as flames ascend presumably hundreds of feet into the air before merging with billowing black clouds (Figure 4.15). Martin was repeatedly criticized for the way he painted figures, and in some ways his static figures cause the city to seem more lifelike. In the right foreground of *The Fall of Nineveh*, a figure clad in golden armor raises his arm and holds a knife ready to drop (Figure 4.16). However, the violence this figure is about to perpetrate seems disconnected from reality due to the way it is painted: more mannequin than maniac. This wooden human figure stands in sharp contrast to the wounded city, which appears to bleed and burn from the injuries inflicted on it.

The connotations of these paintings shift dramatically if the city is viewed as a victim of violence rather than a cause of it. Rather than being an image of the inevitable destruction that accompanies urban life, the painting becomes about *why* the city is destroyed. If the city is no longer the culprit, another one must be found. This ambiguity

transforms the painting's message from one of absolute judgment to one of worthy warning. I would argue that Martin's paintings are about *what* leads to the downfall of the city, not about the inherent evils of the city. They prompt the viewer to consider the causes of the problem rather than to accept an a priori judgment on the city itself.

In order to ascertain what reasons the paintings suggest for the city's downfall, it is essential to consider the radical compositional strategies Martin adopted and how they impacted the meanings generated by the works. Martin's compositions stand in stark contrast to those of most of his colleagues who painted history or scripture. Washington Allston in his version of *Belshazzar's Feast* (1817-43) and Delacroix in his painting of *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1828) (Figure 4.17), in which large scale figures dominate the scene and propel the narrative, followed a more standard mode of academic history painting. Space is physically limited. In Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* a small room contains the scene; in Allston's *Belshazzar's Feast* a large hall that forms the setting is de-emphasized by the scale and significance of the foreground figures. Both of these paintings create a close proximity between the spectator and the scene, even though their viewpoints differ, with Allston's painting situating the viewer at eye-level with the main figures and Delacroix positioning the viewer slightly above and looking down. These viewpoints focus the spectator on the relatively small number of key figures and elements depicted in the scene. In contrast, Martin's works defy conventional viewpoints, opting instead for an elevated and withdrawn perspective. This overview prompts the viewer to consider the broader implications of the subject. While the foreground figures still convey the narrative, a new dimension is added with the inclusion of such broad and deep

space. The key question to consider is *how* these formal differences altered the ideas generated by the painting.

Martin's compositions consistently de-emphasize the kings and increase consideration of the idea of society as a whole. While the king still inhabits a key position in them, he has to compete for the viewer's attention with thousands of minute figures receding into the distance. In Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*, the king is de-centered and can be difficult to find without close inspection. Traditional signs of kingship, such as a crown or a throne, cease to act as clear signifiers when the scale utilized reduces them to minute features of a complex whole. As the foreground figures diminish in size and the space behind them is enhanced, the conception of the guilt born by the entire society is elevated, while the responsibility of the king for the surrounding destruction is somewhat diminished. This mechanism was also utilized in popular prints where the printmaker needed to represent a broad segment of society rather than a few distinct individuals. In a pro-reform wood-engraving of the Peterloo massacre of 1819, the artist similarly elevated the viewpoint, and used perspective to create a sense of extreme visual depth, with minute figures receding into that depth (Figure 4.18). These devices were part of the visual vocabulary in early nineteenth century Britain for representing broad segments of society instead of individuals, and Martin expanded their usage in the world of painting. By employing deep perspective and an elevated viewpoint and reducing the scale of foreground figures while multiplying background figures, Martin not only emphasized the social over the individual but also created a sense that the punishment of God was a result of broad, socially conceived forms of degradation.

By alluding to these ideas, Martin's art aligned itself with the ideas of certain religious and civic leaders who claimed that the judgments of God would be brought upon Britain by a kind of collective or national guilt rather than as a result of individual sinners. One of the most popular millennialist preachers of the early nineteenth century, James Bicheno, preached, "We are a guilty people, and it cannot be repeated too often that nothing but a speedy repentance, personal and national; nothing but a thorough reformation, political and moral, can give us any hope of a long security from calamities most awful."³⁶ Bicheno was a pre-millennialist who foresaw coming destruction but he also believed that national and political repentance could assure divine protection.

The Positioning of the King

While Martin's compositions alluded to widespread social ills, his paintings also made the claim that the reform required by God could not be enacted by any member of society; in these scenes, God required the reformation of the king. The repentance of average citizens in Nineveh or Babylon would have had no impact on their physical salvation. Martin's works leave no room for a type of social separation whereby the righteous would be spared the judgments of God; to the contrary, in his scenes, destruction befalls both the good and the evil. However, reformation on the part of the governmental head could conceivably provide protection to the entire society. The subjects selected by Martin and his representation of the king in them alluded to the idea that it was the king who possessed the agency to affect social change and thereby ensure heavenly protection. In and of itself, Martin's choice of *Belshazzar's Feast* as a subject

³⁶ James Bicheno, *A Word in Season; or, a Call to the Inhabitants of Great Britain, to Stand Prepared for the Consequences of the Present War. Written on the Fast Day, Feb. 25, 1795* (London: Printed for the Author, 1795), 43-44.

emphasized this idea, since he depicted the precise moment in the Babylon narrative when Daniel warned the king of impending destruction. The second subject Martin depicted, *The Fall of Nineveh*, actually represented the second time the city had been on the verge of destruction. In the first case, Nineveh's king chose to heed God's counsel, repented, and the city was spared destruction. Martin also represented this first occasion of Nineveh's repentance, although in a much less famous painting, *The Repentance of Nineveh* (Figure 4.19). While the painting of *The Fall of Nineveh* depicted the ultimate destruction of the city, to spectators familiar with the earlier episodes in the biblical narrative, the painting could have referenced the divergent courses taken and various outcomes experienced by the Ninevites. Though in these compositions the king is de-centered and much smaller in scale than in traditional history paintings, in each of these paintings the king is one of the few clearly delineated figures. In *The Fall of Nineveh* for instance, Martin uses light to highlight the position of the king on the canvas (Figure 4.20). Among the masses of figures that sprawl across the dark canvas, the king is flanked by women clothed in bright white gowns and stands above a pile of glowing golden objects, visually marking him for spectators. In conjunction with the new social dimension of Martin's paintings, the scenes also present a clearly delineated king as the one bearing responsibility for the downfall of the city.

This tension between an allusion to the widespread ills of society and a positioning of the king as the only figure who can stave off destruction is central to understanding the political associations of these works. By suggesting the two ideas in concert, the paintings alluded to a belief that possessed significant currency at the time regarding the status of the British economic and social systems. Because the economic

system in place created and perpetuated the problems in society, rectification of that system was posited as the only means to avert the punishments of God. Thus, the sole individual with the power to do such a thing, the king, was ultimately responsible for the salvation or destruction of the British people.

Such a notion was particularly salient in Britain in the early nineteenth century, a period which saw the rise of religious leaders, politicians, and radical reformers who promoted the idea of imminent apocalypse and argued that social reform was the key to divine protection. At the trial of a Reverend Niel Douglas in 1817, who was being tried for his reformist political views, his accusers claimed that

when expounding the Scriptures, he has felt it his duty to point out to the people those measures of the government of his country which he has seen, for this some time back, to be drawing down the vengeance of heaven upon this country, which measures he has observed for some years to be followed by our government.³⁷

What Reverend Douglas and likeminded reformist preachers seemed to suggest was that God required reformation of government in order to rectify social failings. Reverend Edward Irving emphasized the same idea in dramatic open-air sermons that regularly attracted crowds in the thousands. Quoting the apostle James, Irving wrote,

The last days shall press very hard upon the poor, who shall suffer great oppression, under the evergrown pride and avarice of the rich, . . . I cannot speak so well of other lands; but indeed, and in truth, I can witness that it is even so of this, where the poor, *I say not by oppression of individuals, but by the working of the system, the base system of money making*, are come to a state of destitution, both in town and country, which doth indeed cry aloud into the ear of the Lord of Saboath.³⁸

Irving's critique of the guilty "base system of money making" rather than the guilty individual carried significant rhetorical weight. He was probably the best known preacher in London at the time and he was espousing the same views that had previously

³⁷ "The Trial of the Rev. Niel Douglas for Sedition," *The Christian Reformer* III, no. XXXII (1817): 352.

³⁸ Edward Irving, *The Signs of the Times* (London: Pantton, 1829), 25-26, italics added.

resulted in the arrest and trial of religious leaders. The social dynamic outlined by Irving could not have been resolved by individual repentance or righteousness, unless individual righteousness would produce reforms aimed at alleviating the “destitution” and “oppression” of the poor. The rhetoric of Irving and Douglas was echoed by Martin in paintings that similarly argued for collective British guilt and the need for systemic reform.

Yet identifying the generic “system” as the central problem in Britain did not resolve the debate. The types of reforms required by God were hotly contested as well. Some viewed the incursion of Catholicism and of government legislation favoring Catholicism as the great sins of the age. Others pointed to the rise of radical political discourse and popular revolution as the biggest problem. Still others cited the general lack of religiosity among the people as the sin that would eventually condemn Britain. To judge by his paintings, Martin seemed to align his views with Irving’s in identifying the systematic oppression of the poor as the great sin of modern Britain.

Systematic Oppression of the Poor

Many social and religious reformers claimed, and what I argue Martin’s works suggest, was that the great flaw in British society was the oppression of the poor and the lack of economic equity among the people. Some believed that these glaring inequalities might justify apocalyptic destruction. The 1820s was a decade of relative peace and political calm when compared with both previous and subsequent decades. Nevertheless, historians have noted that the 1820s were the crucial decade in which the radicalism of 1817-1819 was transformed and molded into the eventual legislative reforms of the

1830s.³⁹ It was during this time that the ideas and institutions which legitimized radicalism came about. Karl Marx identified the 1820s as the key period when “modern industry was . . . emerging from the age of childhood” and “opens the periodic cycle of its modern life.”⁴⁰ In the early twentieth century, historian Max Beer asserted that during this decade socialist ideas cohered into a defined ideology.⁴¹

It was also during the 1820s that the voices of Christian reformers were added to early promoters of socialist ideology. Christian reformers used both the Old and New Testaments as points of departure for their platforms. The onset of revolution in France in 1789 caused many religious people to see the ideas of democracy and radicalism as Satanically inspired and to connect them with the apocalyptic prophecies in the Book of Revelation. However, historian W. H. Oliver has pointed out that by the 1820s “the charges turned back upon the accusers” and millennialism became “a vehicle for emergent socialist thinking.”⁴² He continues,

Out of a strange mixture of Southcottian messianism, Owenite political economy, and the St. Simonian philosophy had arisen an apocalyptic view of change in which the greed, the cruelty and the inhumanity of the possessors were identified as the wrongs to be righted, and the possessors themselves as the enemy in need of repentance and in danger of judgment. The apocalypse, socialized out of all supernaturalism, had returned to the actually oppressed, with whom it had taken its origin.⁴³

Religious journals, sermons, and tracts became infused with the notion that economic disparities were at the core of Britain’s moral guilt. Consistent with this view, Jesus was defined as a “reformer” and a “revolutionary” whose ultimate goal was to influence the

³⁹ Edward Royle and James Walvin, *English Radicals and Reformers 1760-1848* (Brighton: Harvester, 1982), 124.

⁴⁰ Karl Marx et al., *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, 3 vols., (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974), 1:24.

⁴¹ See Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism* (London: Bell, 1920).

⁴² W. H. Oliver, *Prophets and Millennialists: The Uses of Biblical Prophecy in England from the 1790s to the 1840s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 216.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

morals of society.⁴⁴ And if divine protection was to be hoped for, the economic system had to be altered to conform with a brand of Christian morality that hinged on elevating the poor.

In an 1829 article in the Christian journal *The Morning Watch* entitled “Signs of the Times in the Church,” the aforementioned Edward Irving argued that the economic abuses allowed and facilitated in Britain could lead to its ultimate destruction:

Now I will put it to any man's conscience, if ever there was a time in the history of the Christian Church—and I may say, in the un-baptized world—wherein by such nefarious practices the coffers of men were filled; wherein so many false pretences were had recourse to in order to increase our gain; such severe measures dealt out by him that hath the money . . . there is a grinding down of the poor, also so that he cannot live by his industry, and is brought into the condition of the pauper.

This type of condemnation was by no means unique to this historical moment or Edward Irving, as encouraging the wealthy to give to the poor was a central teaching of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Yet Irving goes beyond the traditional encouragement of alms giving and pointed to the specific abuses that accompanied the rise of industrialization. He continued,

There is a want of tenderness and principal, often on the part of the master, towards the poor laborer at whose expense of skill and industry his huge fortune is amassed; there is a carelessness of his moral condition, and indifference to the state of his wife and children and poor habitation, a readiness to let him beg for that which he has earned as a servant and laborer of ours... lift up your minds, I pray you, from your own little sphere, and contemplate Protestant Britain, Christian Britain, as it is now exhibited. Almost half of its laboring population dependent upon charity; hardly able, at best, to obtain daily bread; her manufacturing population, again, every now and then brought into actual starvation; while the wealth of the superior order has increased, and is increasing.

⁴⁴ “Jesus Christ a Moral and Religious Reformer,” *The Christian Reformer* 1, no. 1 (1815): 2.

Irving isolates and demarcates the early nineteenth century as fundamentally different from previous ages. Because of the singularity of the situation, Irving goes on to assert that new laws have to be instituted to eliminate these new types of abuses.

Are these men guiltless because they pay a man his scanty wages?... in the eye of the law they are guiltless, but not according to the morality of our Lord. Their cup is outwardly clean, no one can charge them of an actionable offense; nevertheless, within it is full of extortion and excess . . . Oh it is a cruel system, most cruel, hateful system of pharisaical pretense, which is working over this land. We talk of our charities and alms deeds; they are as a drop of that bucket which is filled with the sweat and tears of an overwrought and miserable people . . . woe unto such a system! Woe unto the men of this land, who have been brought under its operation!⁴⁵

For Irving, religious or moral encouragement was hopeless because humankind only reacted to the laws of the land which counted the abusers as innocent. “Charities and alms deeds” were no longer sufficient in Irving’s eyes. What was required was a wholesale change to the “hateful system” that allowed the abuses in the first place.

Influential religious voices such as Edward Irving’s decried the British economic system for its allowance of greed, monetary excess, and oppression of the poor. At precisely the same time, John Martin’s paintings made similar arguments by highlighting those same negative elements in ancient societies on the verge of destruction. His paintings represented two crucial ideas that allowed them to function in support of such a reformist economic agenda. In his paintings of Babylon and Nineveh, the inhabitants of the cities are portrayed as obsessed with the same things—luxury and paganism.

⁴⁵ Edward Irving, “Signs of the Times, and the Characteristics of the Church ” *The Morning Watch, a Quarterly Journal on Prophecy and Theological Review* 1 (1829): 664-66.

Luxury and Reform

Martin's emphasis on luxury and luxurious objects tied his three paintings together. In *Belshazzar's Feast*, the king revels this material extravagance and all who surround him dress in fine clothing, partake of a gluttonous feast, and collectively celebrate their pleasurable lives. As mentioned before, one of the most interesting features of the painting are the mile long tables which begin in the middle ground and recede into the vast distance (Figure 4.21). Martin elevated the idea of a feast to a scale never before seen. This conveyed an extreme idea of the luxurious nature of Babylonian society on the whole. The architecture portrayed in each scene also alluded to the idea of luxurious living. Babylon's decoratively ribbed columns, hanging gardens, and massive buildings indicated the cultural magnificence of the city yet also reinforced the narrative of excess writ large on the canvas.

The deleterious impact of luxury was highlighted most significantly in *The Fall of Nineveh*. An isolated pile of luxury objects sits amidst the chaos in the painting at the foot of Sardanapalus. Both the color and arrangement of this pile of golden "stuff," hovering at the foot of the king, makes it a focal point of the painting. In the left foreground, the mountain of goods being piled up by slaves forms another focal point due to its scale and the gesture of the king which calls attention to it (Figure 4.22). It is difficult to think of another painting that includes such a monumental heap of luxury objects; whereas Delacroix claustrophobically piled up luxury objects in Sardanapalus' bedroom, Martin took the accumulation outdoors and multiplied it exponentially. The pile is so tall that a cave has been carved out at its base, which servants walk in and out of by means of a plank laid over the gulf created by the sheer number of objects. Slaves

march in and out of the mountain depositing goods, some even clamor up the mountain to find more space in which to pile objects. This massive mound of textiles, tables, vases, bowls, and other luxury objects emphasizes an obsession with luxury among the nobility in Nineveh. It also suggests the foolishness of accumulating such objects, in keeping with the theme of traditional *Vanitas* paintings, since they will soon amount to little more than a pile of molten metal and ash.

No idea was more central to the calls for political and social reform than the condemnation of luxury. For reformers, the idea of luxury never existed in isolation but was part of a matrix of concepts that concerned the oppression of the poor. These ideas were visualized in Robert Cruikshank's pro-reform print from 1818, *The Champion of Westminster Defending the People from Ministerial Imps and Reptiles* (Figure 4.23). The print shows Sir Francis Burdett wearing the *phrygian* cap and classical tunic, and defending rundown people in "the Lands of Misery and Oppression" from a slew of monsters and serpents. Burdett stamps his foot on a serpent labeled "corruption," while its twin is inscribed with the words "cruelty," "luxury," "pride," "indolence," and "malice." Another demon is branded with the words "gluttony" and "debauchery" (Figure 4.24). Cruikshank's print illustrated the matrix of ideas to which luxury belonged: it was morally condemned along with indolence, malice, pride, and oppression. In Cowper's famous poem from 1785, *God Made the Country*, the seemingly intrinsic connections between these various qualities was emphasized:

Increase of power begets increase of wealth,
wealth luxury, and luxury excess;
excess, the scrofulous and itchy plague
that seizes first the opulent, descends
to the next rank contagious, and in time

taints downward all the graduated scale.⁴⁶

By representing excessive luxurious living, Martin invoked a set of ideas that associated the wastefulness and superfluity of the upper classes with the oppression of the poor, much as these associations are made as in Cowper's poem and Cruishank's print. In effect, the immense banquet tables laid out in *Belshazzar's Feast* claimed, as William Godwin claimed in his bestselling 1793 book *Political Justice*, that "when we see the wealth of a province spread upon the great man's table, can we be surprised that his neighbors have not bread to satiate the cravings of hunger."⁴⁷ John Thelwall, one of the leading early reformers in the London Corresponding Society, also linked "those tinsel ornaments and ridiculous superfluities which enfeeble our minds, and entail voluptuous diseases on the affluent" with the determinate "scarcity resulting from this extravagance."⁴⁸ All of these reformers pointed to luxury as a key instigator and marker on the path toward societal implosion.

The Synchronizing of the Spiritual and the Secular

Social reformers' emphasis on luxury and Martin's thematic treatment of it is especially crucial at this moment in history for several reasons. First, the condemnation of luxury was the key point of intersection between secular and Christian reformers in the early nineteenth century. Radical reformers frequently decried the financial excesses and inequalities of the British economic system but it was not until Christian reformers echoed their cries and backed their ideas with scripture that the reformist platform was

⁴⁶ Cowper, "God Made the Country."

⁴⁷ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Dublin: Luke White, 1793), 483-4.

⁴⁸ John Thelwall, *The Tribune: A Periodical Publication Consisting Chiefly of the Lectures of J. Thelwall*, vol. 1 (London: Printed for the Author, 1795).

endowed with religious authority and invested with “cosmic significance.”⁴⁹ One of the obstacles religious radicals and reformers faced was being labeled as anti-clerical. This charge was especially effective due to the French revolutionaries’ attack on the Catholic Church. Opponents commonly hurled such anti-religious invective at reformers instead of arguing the merits of their proposals. A correspondent for the *Manchester Observer*, one of the earliest and most influential radical papers, cited numerous scriptures in support of reform and then urged “all true reformers to study their bibles, for by so doing they will be able to confront all their enemies with the laws of heaven itself.”⁵⁰ Another author wrote that “The Holy Bible is acknowledged to be divine by the enemies of Reform. The Bible contains almighty arguments in favour of reform. Then let Reformers take ‘the sword of the spirit’ into the hand of an enlightened judgment and they will find it infinitely superior to BRUTE FORCE, to the bloody swords of Peterloo, for it is ‘mighty through God.’”⁵¹ Reformers recognized that in order to combat those in power, they had to undercut the seemingly pious ground upon which the powerful stood and use a source of traditional authority as their weapon. By co-opting the language of religion and the Bible, radical reformers were able simultaneously to assail arguments against reform and appeal to the British people on a more popular level.

The majority of British radicals did not overtly oppose religion as many French radicals had done, although undoubtedly some shared an antipathy for religion. Many British radicals were members of dissenting religious groups such as the Methodists and Baptists, and strongly opposed state-sponsored religion, yet were more fiercely religious

⁴⁹ Mark Clement, “True Religion: Christianity and the Rhetoric of Early Nineteenth-Century English Popular Radicalism,” *Journal of Religious History* 20, no. 1 (1996): 15.

⁵⁰ *The Manchester Observer*, 25 December 1819, 801.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 859.

than their Anglican counterparts. These reformers were quick to point out that Christ himself came from the lower class. As reformer Christian Magia wrote, “What, then, is to be done, when the hapless poor are treated as they are by the lovers and worshipers of Mammon? Is poverty a crime? Then it was so with Jesus and his disciples.”⁵² For many reformers, religion was an impetus to reform as well as standard by which progress should be measured. John Ovington argued that national sin required national repentance, which could only come through properly conceived law. “The oppression of the hireling in his wages, is a public, a national sin,” Ovington wrote. “It is injurious to every member of society, and deserves to be punished as much as a public robbery.”⁵³ Such rhetoric framed the reformist debate in Christian terms and posited legislation as the gateway to national repentance.

Whether religious or not, all reformers were impacted by this anti-clerical branding because it detracted from their ability to obtain popular support from the masses, who were still predominantly religious. Because of this, even those reformers who deplored religion often used religious language in their writings and speeches. One such reformer, who published under the name Roger Radical, attempted to bind Christianity to reformist politics by noting their common perspectives on economics:

Treasure up in your minds political charity, a tender sympathy for your brother reformers, and assist by every means in your power, the martyrs and sufferers in your cause. That cause is now the CHRISTIANITY OF POLITICS; it combines us in the common brotherhood of feeling and sentiment; it separates us from the luxurious, depraved, and opulent portions of the community; it unites us in a

⁵² Christian Magia, *A Divine and Prophetic Warning to the British Nation and to the Whole World* (London: Hamilton and Adams, 1832), 44-45.

⁵³ John Ovington, *The Labouring Man's Advocate: An Appeal to the Justice and Humanity of the British Public Respecting the Wages of Labour* (Clapham Common: J. Ovington, 1817), 74.

common interest to better our political condition, and to procure for us that heaven on earth, which the God of nature intended to be our lot.⁵⁴

Roger Radical defined a certain perspective on “the luxurious” as the point of separation between those in society who lacked a true conception of Christianity and those who properly conceived of “the CHRISTIANITY OF POLITICS.” The political effectiveness of merging Christianity with reformist politics was not only theoretically viable but in practice produced some of the most successful reformist platforms of the early decades of the nineteenth century.

The Fight to Define Luxury

To contextualize the significance of the theme of luxury as treated by Martin in the Mesopotamian Trilogy, a digression is required to explore the resonances of luxury in public discourse during the 1820s. The concept of luxury had become the primary site for a battle between economic schools of thought during the eighteenth century. For centuries, going at least back to Plato, luxury had been defined on religious and ethical grounds as the opposite of goodness. To quote the well known biblical passage, “the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows (1 Timothy 6:10).” For believing Christians, luxury was bound to notions of unhealthy attachment to earthly indulgences that distracted people from true spirituality. Moreover, eighteenth-century civic humanists saw luxury as a threat to a healthy republican society. Luxury was believed to lead to effeminacy and a de-sensitization toward the common good. From this perspective, the presence of luxury among those who ruled society indicated

⁵⁴ Roger Radical, *Why Are We Poor? An Address to the Industrious and Laborious Classes of the Community* (London: C. Harris, Broad Court, Long Acre, 1820), 20.

corruption and a progression toward decay and despotism.⁵⁵ Jean-Jacques Rousseau was one of many thinkers who viewed the eighteenth-century expansion of commerce as dangerous to the stability of society specifically because it facilitated the proliferation of luxury. A contemporary historian has summarized Rousseau's position on luxury in the following terms: "For Rousseau, the relationship of riches and poverty is of a devastatingly simple zero-sum kind . . . the rich can be rich only *because* the poor are poor."⁵⁶ This line of thinking was echoed in early nineteenth-century Britain by Charles Hall, who wrote that "what the possessor has, the non-possessor is deprived of. The situation of the rich and poor like the algebraic terms plus and minus, are in direct opposition to, and destructive of each other."⁵⁷ Rousseau and Hall no doubt felt compelled to condemn luxury because of its prevalence in an increasingly mercantilist economy, but also because their conception of luxury had come under attack during the eighteenth century.

Scottish moral philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Hume advanced an influential new conception of luxury. For Smith and Hume commerce was part of the state of nature, and luxury thus signified progress. Rather than revealing depravity and corruption, Smith and Hume saw in luxury the positive culmination of civilization and morality.⁵⁸ In contrast to savage forms of civilization dominated by violence and force, these thinkers re-cast what Rousseau saw as "effeminate" as a superior sensibility of

⁵⁵ See Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 152; Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, New Americanists (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 34.

⁵⁶ Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750-1834*, Ideas in Context (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 72.

⁵⁷ Charles Hall, *The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States* (London: Printed for the author, 1805), 67.

⁵⁸ Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, 34.

gentility.⁵⁹ By connecting luxury to the state of nature, they attempted to strip it of the negative associations with which Christian theologians and civic humanist philosophers had branded it. In the words of historian J. G. A. Pocock, they created a “civic morality of investment and exchange” which equated “the commercial ethic with the Christian . . . Machiavelli’s antithesis between civic and Christian virtue was in fact repeated in the form of a supposed historical progression.”⁶⁰

To combat the discourse on luxury posited by Christians and civic humanists, wherein luxury implied the oppression of the lower classes, the Scottish moral philosophers pointed to two principles. First, they maintained that an increase of luxury leads to an increase in employment of the lower orders who produce luxury objects. In short, consumption requires production and production requires labor. This point was emphasized by the political philosopher Bernard Mandeville at the beginning of the eighteenth century in his infamous *Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*.⁶¹ The central tenet of his work was that what Christianity had termed vice was in fact essential for economic prosperity. He used the metaphor of a hive of bees who live luxurious, yet vice-filled lives, to express his views:

Vast Numbers thronged the fruitful Hive;
Yet those vast Numbers made 'em thrive;
Millions endeavouring to supply
Each other's Lust and Vanity;
Whilst other Millions were employ'd, [35]
To see their Handy-works destroy'd . . .
Thus every Part was full of Vice, [155]
Yet the whole Mass a Paradise . . .

⁵⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁶⁰ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 440-41.

⁶¹ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or, Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, 6th ed. (London: J. Tonson, 1732).

Flatter'd in Peace, and fear'd in Wars
They were th' Esteem of Foreigners,
And lavish of their Wealth and Lives,
The Ballance of all other Hives. [160]
Such were the Blessings of that State;
Their Crimes conspired to make 'em Great;
And Vertue, who from Politicks
Had learn'd a Thousand cunning Tricks,
Was, by their happy Influence, [165]
Made Friends with Vice: And ever since
The worst of all the Multitude
Did something for the common Good . . .
The Root of evil Avarice,
That damn'd ill-natur'd baneful Vice,
Was Slave to Prodigality,
That Noble Sin; whilst Luxury. [180]
Employ'd a Million of the Poor,
And odious Pride a Million more
Envy it self, and Vanity
Were Ministers of Industry;

Even Adam Smith would probably have shied away from the blasphemous assertion that vice necessarily equaled public benefit. Yet he agreed with many of the principles in Mandeville's text, especially the idea that luxury was a positive thing because it "Employ'd a Million of the Poor."

The second principle maintained by the Scottish moral philosophers was that people with the means to live luxuriously were more likely to be benevolent than those with limited financial means. Lord Kames, a popular author who promoted Scottish ideas in his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1779), wrote that luxury helped those on the top of the social ladder because it inevitably "improves their benevolence" and thus benefited society at large.⁶² This new formulation of the idea of luxury did not simply negate the arguments of Christians and civic humanists but inverted them. According to this estimation, luxury had the ability to employ the poor and to "trickle down" to them

⁶² Henry Home Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, vol. 1 (Dublin: James Williams, 1779), 219.

via the possessor's benevolence. Thus, Adam Smith was able to boldly claim that "opulence" and "freedom" were "the two greatest blessings that man can possess."⁶³

This conception of luxury was a key component in the argument for a new, scientifically-based perspective on economics that was termed "political economy." Political economy emphasized the need for *laissez faire* economic policies which would lead to greater luxuries and thus greater freedom.

This new ideology gained a significant following over the course of the eighteenth century. By the time John Martin's paintings were exhibited in Britain, however, another group of reform-minded thinkers had begun to reassert the traditional negative view of luxury. And it was their ideas that coincided with the representation of luxury in Martin's works. In this view, the issue of labor was no longer about a lack of employment but centered instead on working conditions imposed by an overly burdensome workload. The rise of factories offered employment yet they also brought new forms of oppression for the lower orders of society.

Martin's paintings, though not centered on the representation of the lower classes, coincided with the calls for reform by repeatedly emphasizing the concept of luxury and binding it to the idea of destruction. The subjects tended to prohibit placing peasants or laborers in the compositions, but the degree to which luxury has overtaken society becomes the dominant theme in each painting. This is evident in the great hall of Belshazzar, where every figure on the canvas, even the miniscule dots in the pictorial distance, appear to partake of the luxurious feast. The broad urban vistas in *The Fall of Babylon* and *The Fall of Nineveh* are filled with elegant gardens, magnificent buildings,

⁶³ Adam Smith et al., *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 185.

beautiful bridges, and colossal statuary. Luxurious living was at the core of each of these societies.

Martin's repeated association of luxury with fallen civilizations is important because one of the key challenges to the Scottish moral philosophers involved the social and economic repercussions of producing and consuming large quantities of luxury items. Charles Hall was a noted physician and social critic who fought to re-inscribe the negative impact of luxury on society. In *The Effect of Civilization* from 1805 he wrote regarding the inevitable shift of workers into the production of luxury items:

As the quantity of the necessaries of life, that are or can be consumed by the rich, are limited, and in the purchasing of which a small part of their wealth can be expended, the surplus they are naturally inclined to lay out in procuring the conveniences, the elegancies, and luxuries of life; these are the produce of the more refined manufactures of different kinds . . . of course a greater proportion of the laboring hands are forced to apply their industry in the various fine manufacturers, in which they only can get employ.⁶⁴

Hall argued that if large numbers of the lower orders were forced to take employment in producing luxuries, they would necessarily be taken away from producing necessities. The resulting effect would be a dramatic rise in the prices of things like food, shelter, and clothing, which would have little effect on those purchasing luxuries but dire consequences for those in the lower classes working to produce those luxuries.

Another chief argument by reformers, which again coincided with the representation of luxury in Martin's works, was that morally dubious qualities inherently accompanied luxury. In spite of the economic arguments made by the political economists wherein wealth at the top trickled down to those below, reformers noted that

⁶⁴ Hall, *The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States*, 44-5.

the adverse moral tendencies of excessive wealth also tended to trickle down the social ladder. The reformist writer Roger Radical framed the debate as follows:

The enormous opulence of a few individuals may, at first glance, be presumed to be attended with benefit, at least to those who come into contact with the possessors of this wealth, but, on a closer inspection, it will be found to be pregnant with the most direful effects to the community at large. The moral tendency of the excessive wealth is too frequently overlooked, though it is the main point of consideration; for it is to the odious actions engendered by this grasping spirit, that the public calamities may be most accurately traced.⁶⁵

These thinkers used the logic of Christian morality, wherein luxury was considered fundamentally immoral, to combat the possible economic benefits of a system that fostered luxurious living. The social reformer William Thompson stated that “excessive wealth excites adoration and imitation, and in this way diffuses the practice of the vices of the rich, amongst the rest of the community.”⁶⁶ Many reformers pointed to the contagious social consequences of excessive wealth as a reason for enacting policies that would distribute wealth more broadly.

Martin’s Mesopotamian Trilogy is a visual representation of the vices of the rich being diffused throughout a community. The pictorial space that Martin created and the masses of figures he included allowed spectators to consider this diffusion in visual rather than theoretical terms. In these three paintings, Martin defied the positive conception of luxury asserted by the Scottish moral philosophers by binding it to a decadent society on the verge of implosion. The golden cups, sumptuous feasts, and elaborate decorations that adorn Belshazzar’s hall and Sardanapalus’ city served to undermine the positive justification of luxury advanced by Smith and Hume. In this way, Martin’s paintings can

⁶⁵ Radical, *Why Are We Poor? An Address to the Industrious and Laborious Classes of the Community*, 12.

⁶⁶ William Thompson, *An Inquiry into the Principles of Wealth Most Conducive to Human Happiness* (London: Wm. S. Orr and Co., 1820), 147.

be viewed as supporting reformist calls for legislative interference in the social and economic order as a means for solving the problems associated with luxury.

Paganism

One theme Martin highlighted in the Mesopotamian Trilogy was the devotion to pagan forms of worship in these ancient societies. Through the repetitive inclusion of pagan statuary and ritual, paganism becomes a core element of Babylonian and Ninevite societies. In *Belshazzar's Feast*, where even the foreground figures are pushed back away from the viewer, one form stands out and seems to extend toward the viewer. In the lower left corner an enormous stone sculpture shows a snake wrapped around a tapered pillar with a rounded top (Figure 4.25). The menacing stone snake bears strangely animated features: it is depicted with its mouth wide open, sharp fangs exposed, and elongated forked tongue emanating from its poisonous mouth. Similar snake forms recur across the canvas. In the foreground, curved snakes coil atop carved elephants that flank Belshazzar's royal throne. Snakes curve around the tops of staffs carried by the king's priests, one of which is conspicuously abandoned on the empty stairs (Figure 4.26). In the middle-ground, a series of large curved snake statues run down the length of the upper level of the hall, dramatically silhouetted against the divine light behind them (Figure 4.27). In *The Fall of Babylon* as well, a large sculpture of a giant open-mouthed snake wrapped around a phallic form is situated on the banks of the river while an almost identical sculpture occupies the center of *The Fall of Nineveh* (Figure 4.28-29). While the snake would probably not have connoted any specific religion, it would have acted as a generic signifier of an ancient form of animal or idol worship.

The theme of paganism was re-enforced by a number of other symbolic forms and narrative components. For instance, a massive golden sculpture of a man with one arm raised and an immense snake coiling around his body occupies the middle of the lower level of Belshazzar's hall (Figure 4.30). At the base of the sculpture are large fires, which Martin defined as alluding to some type of pagan sacrifice.⁶⁷ In front of the fires, masses of tiny figures prostrate themselves before the golden idol. Martin repeated this statue of a snake-enwrapped human at least three times in the deep recesses of the hall. Along the top edge of the courtyard's architecture, more golden figures wrapped in snakes stand like Apostles and Saints looking down onto Bernini's St. Peter's piazza. The concept of paganism was also elevated by other architectural details, including carvings of various animalistic symbols such as scorpions, crabs, and lions on the cornices around the central courtyard. Finally, the only architectural elements visible outside of Belshazzar's hall are two large temples, identified by Martin as the temple of Belus and the Tower of Babel.⁶⁸ These two structures are also included in *The Fall of Babylon*, and they would have alluded to the foolishness of pagan worship in the minds of most early nineteenth-century spectators. The clouds that surround and engulf the tower of Babel visually demonstrate God's displeasure at the massive tower that competed with him. On both a microscopic and macroscopic level, Martin's paintings represent societies misguided by pagan forms of belief.

By invoking the concept of paganism, Martin's works invariably engaged a number of themes present in public discourses on political reform. The worship of an animal or statue was not feared by many in British society, though some commentators

⁶⁷ Martin, *A Description of the Picture Belshazzar's Feast Painted by Mr. J. Martin Which Gained the Highest Premium at the British Institution*.

⁶⁸Ibid.

saw the upper class preoccupation with classical sculpture as a re-enactment of the original pagan patrons of these works. As one reformer wrote, “Courts, and King's, and lords, and landlords . . . In which of their dwellings will not be found the pictures, the statues, the busts, of their Jupiters, Junis, Apollos, Dianas, Venuses etc. etc.”⁶⁹ The recent construction of the Indian-inspired Royal Pavilion at Brighton furthered this association with paganism. One commentator called the pavilion’s onion dome a “pagan derivation” because it was from an age when men worshipped onions, and “now [onions] even decorate the Royal Pavillion at Brighton.”⁷⁰ Others related the idea of paganism to Britain’s obsession with wealth. In an 1826 letter, a reverend Henry Budd referred to “national credit” as “the chief idol” to which “every consideration of homage has been paid.”⁷¹ Whether through the upper-class’s interest in sculpture and architecture that was believed to have had pagan roots, or through the metaphorical connections between paganism and the worship of wealth in Britain, Martin’s references to paganism seemed to take up the attack on those possessing wealth in modern Britain.

Paganism and the Spenceans

Perhaps the most thorough and damning employment of the idea of paganism came from Thomas Evans, the leader of a significant reformist group known as the Spencean Philanthropists. The Spenceans were extremely active and influential during the period when Martin’s works appeared in London and Martin’s invocation of

⁶⁹ Thomas Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy* (London: published for the author, 1816), 9.

⁷⁰ “Russian Traveling Sketches,” *The New Monthly magazine and Literary Journal* 20 (1827): 558.

⁷¹ Henry Budd and Robert Benton Seeley, *A Memoir of the Rev. Henry Budd ... Comprising an Autobiography; Letters, Papers, & Remains Etc.* (London: Seeley, Jackson & Halliday, 1855), 437-8.

paganism might have recalled Evans's perspective on paganism. In order to properly understand the significance of Evans's views on paganism and their relation to Martin's paintings, a brief digression on the Spencean movement will be in order.

Thomas Spence's legacy has been largely overshadowed by more vocal reformers like William Cobbett or Richard Carlile, but the Spenceans were one of the most significant reformist groups in Britain during the first two decades of the nineteenth century.⁷² In fact Carlile proclaimed himself to be a follower of Spence.⁷³ As a young boy in the 1770s Spence witnessed the effects of land enclosure upon the lower orders of society and was moved to preach on the streets of Newcastle and London. Spence's political ideas were based almost entirely on biblical principles. At the core of his program was a belief that the bible portrayed private ownership of property as the basis for all social evil. Spence conceived of a scheme of land nationalization and re-distribution based on the ideas laid out by Moses in the Book of Leviticus. This was his remedy to modern privatization. Spence was convinced that "God was a very notorious Leveller."⁷⁴ He posited a millennial vision of the future wherein those on the bottom of society would be elevated economically following the apocalypse. Spence believed that

⁷² Jeremy Burchardt says the following about Spence's influence: "Spence and his plan were well known to all the leading radical figures of the 1820s and 1830s . . . Spence probably contributed more than any other thinker to the strength of agrarianism within radical circles in the 1820s and 1830s." Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 38. Spence was significant enough to have three different biographies written of him in the immediate years after his death: Thomas Evans, *A Brief Sketch of the Life of Mr. Thomas Spence* (Manchester, 1821); E. Mackenzie, *Memoir of Thomas Spence, of Newcastle Upon Tyne* (Newcastle, 1826); Allen Davenport, *The Life, Writings and Principles of Thomas Spence, Author of the Spencean System, or Agrarian Equality ... With a Portrait of the Author* (London, Wakelin, 1836). For more recent treatments on the legacy of Spence see Malcolm Chase, *'the People's Farm': English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); David Worrall, *Radical Culture: Discourse, Resistance and Surveillance, 1790-1820* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992); Anne Janowitz, *Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Henry Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall & Jacobin Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).

⁷³ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800*, 38.

⁷⁴ Thomas Spence, *The Rights of Man* (London: Printed for the Author, 1793), 22.

“man’s fall from grace was a consequence of a greedy few appropriating private property from God’s common storehouse.”⁷⁵

The Spenceans used one of the more unorthodox propaganda campaigns in the early nineteenth century to capture public attention and promote the Mosaic system. At night Spence and his followers would take white chalk and black charcoal and scrawl Spencean slogans on buildings and walls across London. In 1802 the Prime Minister was informed that “there was scarcely a wall in London that did not have chalked upon it the slogan ‘Spence’s Plan and Full Bellies’.”⁷⁶ And a decade, by which point the Spenceans had a popular a periodical called *The Giant Killer or Anti-Landlord*, Lord Sidmouth felt compelled to send a circular letter to the police on how to deal with the problem. By 1816, Spencean societies “had been formed throughout the metropolis.”⁷⁷ Spenceanism was prominently featured in an 1817 satirical print by George Cruikshank. The print depicted Henry Brougham, a Whig supporter of moderate reforms, training a fire hose on a gas container that is wrapped by serpents which represent radical reformist programs (Figure 4.31). The most prominent of these serpents has the head of Thomas Evans, the leader of Spencean movement following Spence’s death in 1814. Joining Thomas Evans are the heads of prominent reformers Hunt and Cobbet, who had no program comparable to the “Spencean Plan” that is inscribed on the body of the Evans serpent (Figure 4.32).

Historian Jeremy Burchardt has recently written that “between 1816 and 1829, when London radicalism was at its height, the Spenceans appear to have been

⁷⁵ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 63.

⁷⁶ Peter Linebaugh, “Jubilating; or, How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee against Capitalism and with Some Success,” *Radical History Review* 50 (1991): 156.

⁷⁷ Marcus Wood, *Radical Satire and Print Culture, 1790-1822* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 85; “Art Xi,” *The Quarterly Review* XVI, no. XXXI (1816): 268.

instrumental in precipitating most of the attempts at insurrection.”⁷⁸ Another historian has referred to the Spenceans as “the core of revolutionary conspiracy in London” in the early nineteenth century.⁷⁹ The degree of attention devoted to the political program of Thomas Spence in an 1816 issue of the *Quarterly Review* substantiates these claims. In its review of Thomas Evans’ Spencean publication *Christian Policy*, the author wrote that the Spenceans needed to be feared because Spence was “infinitely more respectable than the shallow orators who declaim about ‘reform’.” In the writer’s eyes, Spence was dangerous because he was *not* a fanatic but “was honest,” in contrast to men “who, like Cobbett, make mischief in their trade because they find it a gainful one.”⁸⁰ He concluded:

These levelers are not to be confused with the factious crew who clamour they know not why, for they know not what . . . The Spenceans are far more respectable than these, for they have a distinct and intelligible system, they know what they aim at and honestly declare it. Neither is the system so foolish, or so devoid of attraction, that it may safely be despised . . . they are increasing in numbers, and they are zealously spreading their opinions . . . If the English Revolution were once commenced it would go on this point.⁸¹

This seemingly genuine concern speaks to the influence of Spence’s plan and the fear it provoked in the second decade of the nineteenth century. In addition, the respectability which the author pointed out, largely a result of the biblical basis of the ideology, set the Spenceans apart from other radical movements.

The political influence of the Spenceans reached its peak under the leadership of Spence’s successor, Thomas Evans. In 1816 Evans published a pamphlet entitled *Christian Policy*, which proved to be popular, going through two editions in its first year.

⁷⁸ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800*, 48.

⁷⁹ Thomas R. Knox, “Thomas Spence: The Trumpet of Jubilee,” *Past and Present*, no. 76 (1977): 75.

⁸⁰ “Art Xi,” 267.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*: 271.

In it, he argued for the central Spencean platform, equal re-distribution of land. To justify such a radical political program, Evans turned to a historical precedent. He concluded that when history was carefully considered, it became clear that the idea of equal land distribution had its roots in the bible, where “every one of [the Israelites had] a possession in the land forever,” whereas the idea of private property was rooted in pagan societies.⁸² The word “pagan” was printed hundreds of times in this relatively brief pamphlet and was the driving point of logic for why the British economic and social system was corrupt. Evans referred to landowners as “the Priests of paganism” and “the remains of paganism,” and claimed that “landlords, and slaves, and oppression, and war, and priests, and ignorance, are the produce of paganism—they were pagan in their origin, and they remain pagan still.”⁸³

Evans also linked the remains of paganism with the last days prior to the apocalypse, and proposed that an eradication of such pagan establishments was the key to avoiding the apocalyptic destructions described in the bible:

Thus landlords, the remains of paganism, supersede the power of the divinity – His laws – His commands . . . for the needy, the widow, and the fatherless, they build prisons, and call them workhouses; by which to dispose of their victims of misery and oppression. But the sacred records declare, that such establishments shall not endure in peace, and the awful visitation arising therefrom in our own days are evidence, that till we put away the abomination of desolation, paganism; and return to a just administration of that property which is equally the natural right of all, by abolishing Lordship in the soil, the earth will be filled with violence, and will continue to be deluged with blood.⁸⁴

While others linked the apocalypse with everything from the rise of irreligion to the rise of Napoleon, Evans connected it directly to a “pagan” claim to private property. In a less

⁸² Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy*, 8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 17, 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

prophetic manner, he also noted that *if* God was part of the current British government it would be difficult to see God as anything but a pagan god. From Evans' point of view, the vile government currently in power

has no end to its ravages, it drives the people from their homes, saps their industry by exactions, leaves them neither house, nor goods, nor clothes, nor food; drives them to crime, and murders them by thousands, a thousand different ways; and then perhaps claims a right from God for exercising such abominable authority, thereby establishing hell upon the earth. Judge, reader, what sort of a God must be meant; it cannot be the God of the Jews, of the Christians, a good God; no it must be Mammon, or Moloch, of Baal, or Jupiter, or Woden, or Thor, or Pluto.⁸⁵

In short, Evans believed that "Christian Policy" was to follow the pattern established by God through Moses wherein there was an equal distribution of land among the Israelites. He concluded succinctly, "Christian policy would make this world a paradise, the prevailing pagan system constitutes a hell: both are now fairly and truly before you, reader, choose for yourself."⁸⁶

The Spencean movement took up the logic of Evans and utilized it in many of its political arguments. A poem published in the radical journal *Medusa* in 1819 with the title "The wrongs of Man, or, Things as they are" contained the following portions:

Man nothing less than lord was meant
Of all things here below;
But then 'twas giv'n to all mankind,
All records plainly show;
But in Despite of Heaven's decree,
There is a *lordly* race,
That from the Pagan world has sprung,
And usurp'd the Maker's place.

By Satan they must be upheld,
That seize on all the land,
And Waste mankind with fire and sword,
To get supreme command;

⁸⁵ Ibid., 20

⁸⁶ Ibid., 15.

And with their Pagan laws to bind
Their brethren to the clod,
In slav'ry, pain, and poverty,
Spite the laws of God.⁸⁷

Martin's employment of pagan signifiers gained a new level of meaning and significance in light of the Spencean view of paganism as the root of private ownership. By situating the irresponsible and luxurious leadership of Belshazzar within a pagan context, overflowing with the worship of golden snakes and golden idols, Martin's work reinforced the logic of Thomas Evans and other followers of the Spencean political plan for land re-distribution. Evans described the interdependence of luxury and paganism, which were the twin sins of Babylon and branded them as the underlying forces behind for modern oppression. Martin's Mesopotamia Trilogy visually conjoined luxury and paganism and re-enforced the inherent ties upon which the logic of Evans relied.

Countering the Paternalistic Landscape

One of the challenges to studying the reception of works of art is the lack of sources that document the physical installation of the works. Questions like, "What works of art were exhibited alongside the piece in question, and how did that change the way people might have seen the work in question?" can only rarely be addressed.

Fortunately, *Belshazzar's Feast* is a rare exception to that rule. The 1821 edition of *The Magazine of the Fine Arts* contains a number of etchings showing the interior of various galleries; one of them is the room at the British Institution containing John Martin's much talked about painting (Figure 4.33). *Belshazzar's Feast* sits as the centerpiece of the right wall, a spot reserved for the works generally considered to be the best in the exhibition.

⁸⁷ A Spencean Philanthropist, "The Wrongs of Man, or, Things as They Are," *Medusa* (1819): 24.

It is surrounded by more standard works of art produced in Britain during the time. There are a number of portraits and animal paintings, but the majority of the works seem to fit under the broad umbrella of landscape paintings (Figure 4.34), as indicated by motifs such as windmills, classical architectural forms, and sailboats. This print provides an impetus to consider how Martin's works would have differed from most of the landscape paintings hanging alongside it and how that contrast might have impacted the creation of meaning.

One of my chief contentions has been that Martin's works aligned with the ideas of political reform. When considered in relation to conventional landscape paintings, there is a sense that Martin's works seem to do more than merely suggest reformist ideas, but to in effect demand it. For those who looked to solve the social and economic problems caused by urbanization and industrialization, there were two ways of approaching solutions summarized by historian Bruce Coleman:

In the cities the critics saw tendencies toward anarchy, the denial of social responsibility by the wealthy, and the breakdown of community as it had been traditionally understood . . . For a check upon economic individualism the critics looked sometimes to legislative interference or, more often, to an ideal of social duty and cohesion, a system of social control, which some located in the hierarchic paternalism which they believed to exist in rural society or to have existed in historic times.⁸⁸

Of the two alternatives Coleman identifies, "legislative interference" and "hierarchical paternalism," it is easy to see how landscape paintings could have coincided with the latter. Landscape paintings commonly pointed toward either the past or an idealized present and encouraged reflection on the bygone days of social cohesion which had been

⁸⁸ Coleman, ed. *The Idea of the City in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, 6.

lost with the rise of the city.⁸⁹ As Ann Bermingham has written, “Precisely when the countryside . . . was becoming unrecognizable, and dramatically marked by historical change, it was offered as the image of the homely, the stable, the ahistorical.”⁹⁰

Landscape paintings can be seen as nudges in the sides of those with power and money, reminders that in a more proper time those on top supported those on bottom and made society more whole and wholesome.

Rather than suggesting or encouraging a return to paternalistic voluntary care for the poor, Martin’s works seem to demand the alternative course of action analyzed by Coleman: legislative intervention.⁹¹ These paintings almost insist that unless government leaders interfered directly and immediately in alleviating the economic disparities prevalent in British society, destruction would come. Far from merely picturing a idealized past or a pastoral “other,” Martin’s paintings demonstrated the destructive consequences to a society in which those on top failed to heed the promptings of God.

⁸⁹ Though much research on landscape painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is aimed at complicating this overgeneralization, most scholars also admit to its presence. See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge [Eng.] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Andrew Hemingway, *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Peter De Bolla, Nigel Leask, and David Simpson, *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste*, Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Cultures of Print (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). For example, part of Barrell’s argument is that as time progresses from the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, the size and importance of figures within landscape paintings tends to decrease. Whereas in the works of Morland and Gainsborough there are occasions where the lower-class figures speak to their apparent oppression, in the later works of Constable the figures are so small and insignificant that they cease to convey any social tension. And even in the works of Morland, Barrell asserts that on the whole they too offer the “image of a stable, unified, almost egalitarian society.”

⁹⁰ Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860*, 9.

⁹¹ This binary divide between “paternalism” and “legislative intervention” was not as simplistic as it may appear in my brief discussion here. Many who might be qualified as “paternalistic” were in favor of legislative reforms that forced the upper classes to act paternalistically. In fact, historian Kim Lawes has asserted that the “substitution of governmental for familial and community responsibility” is the key feature that distinguishes nineteenth century paternalism from eighteenth century paternalism. Kim Lawes, *Paternalism and Politics: The Revival of Paternalism in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000). For a more in-depth discussion on the matter, also see David Roberts, *Paternalism in Early Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

They located the blame for social ills in luxurious living, over indulgence, widespread greed, and pagan worship, and by so doing corresponded to the rhetoric of radical reform that called for immediate legislative solutions. Hanging alongside the peaceful scenes of the British countryside, which could have been seen to substantiate a *laissez faire* approach to social problems, Martin's works visually demanded, even screamed, for immediate social reforms.

Martin's paintings made certain demands on viewers by virtue of their scale, depth, detail, and drama, which contrasted with the traditional landscape paintings that surrounded them on gallery walls. We can get some sense of their demanding presence from a reviewer who wrote, "There is a greatness and a grandeur depicted on [Martin's canvases] which have never been achieved, or even portrayed, by any other artist, and which were never even dreamed of by men until they first flashed with electric splendor upon the unexpected public."⁹² Another reviewer elaborated on the effect of this "electric splendor" and captured the aggressive affect of Martin's works affected viewers by referring to their "imposition" and "power over the eye": "[Martin] produced grand effects by illusion—*perhaps by imposition* . . . nobody else had caught the trick by which he ravished the senses of the multitude, and sometimes dazzled the imaginations of calmer men. Legitimate or illegitimate, there was a spell in Martin's art. It had power over the eye, and often led captive the judgment."⁹³ The notion that a painting imposes its will on a viewer and casts a spell that controls an individual's judgment might seem far-fetched. But it aptly conveys the unusual and powerful impact of Martin's paintings on his contemporaries, especially when compared with most other contemporary

⁹² "On the Genius of John Martin," 99.

⁹³ "John Martin, Esq.," *Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1854, 433, italics added.

paintings. Because of this sensation of the painting's imposition of its will and viewpoint on the viewer, it is possible to consider Martin's works as not simply echoing the ideas of political reformers but as visually staging or suggesting the means by which reform might be accomplished.

Chapter 5

Contingent Deliverance: Three Paintings of the Exodus

The word “catastrophe” has recurred more frequently in relation to the works of John Martin than perhaps any other.¹ Martin’s dramatic representations of immense buildings severed by bolts of lightning, plagues raining down from heaven, and giant chasms consuming entire cities have provoked the utterance of “catastrophe” from the lips and pens of spectators, critics, and scholars. The word stems etymologically from the Greek *katastrephein*, meaning “to overturn,” yet during the eighteenth century “catastrophe” became associated specifically with the idea of “disaster,” a synonymical pairing that remains common today. But whereas disasters almost always carry negative overtones, overturning does not have clear cut connotations. Determining the connotations of “overturning” depends on one’s perspective on that which has been or is being overturned. While the overturning of a government might be hailed as tragic by some citizens, it could be seen as miraculous in the eyes of others.

The narratives portrayed by John Martin demonstrate the phenomena of “overturning,” yet to categorize them as solely negative would be shortsighted. Depending on the perspective of the viewer the paintings could either be regarded as representations of violent destruction or of triumphant deliverance. This variability in the

¹ “Fine Arts,” *Literary Chronicle*, no. 352 (1826): 94.

possibilities for interpreting the paintings is mirrored by the variability in the early nineteenth-century commentaries on the apocalypse, to which the paintings allude. As one religious tract proclaimed, “Oh what a day [the day of apocalypse] will be; a day of terror! A day of triumph! A day of confusion to the wicked! But of comfort to the godly!”² From the perspective of the believing Christian, the apocalypse can never be separated from the idea of the millennium, and this discursive connection enables the negative connotations of the apocalypse to be coupled with the positive conception of deliverance. Sociologist David G. Bromley has noted the purpose of the apocalypse is “not destruction but creation”:

Socially the apocalyptic response is to distance from the existing social order and create an alternative order that models social relations on a vision of the new world to come. Apocalypticism is thus revolutionary but not revolution; it proposes much more than a transfer of power and a replacement of regime. And it is not a vision of doomsday. Catastrophe may be imminent, but the apocalypse is a cataclysm with meaning, one that has as its final purpose not destruction but creation.³

At the manifest level of their content, the detrimental aspects of catastrophe may seem most apparent in the paintings of Martin, yet this positive view of apocalypse requires us to consider the productive and creative aspects of deliverance in their subjects as well. The creative moment of apocalyptic overturning that Bromley described is always conceived of as taking place in the future, yet the past provides the evidence for it. In the early nineteenth century a number of historical precedents were thought to prefigure the eventual apocalyptic deliverance. The fall of Babylon and the universal flood

² *The Christian's Diary; or, an Almanack for One Day, Etc.* (London: J. Evans, 1800), 3.

³ David G. Bromley, “Constructing Apocalypticism: Social and Cultural Elements of Radical Organization,” in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (New York: Routledge, 1997), 34-5. Bromley’s statement regards the general theological implications of a belief in the Christian apocalypse and is not specific to the nineteenth century, but the statement coincides with what nineteenth-century commentators commonly preached.

(also portrayed by Martin in the 1820s) were each cited by religious-minded men in the early nineteenth century as evidence of this hopeful dimension of the apocalypse.

Babylon's destruction freed the captive Israelites and the flood carried Noah and his family in the ark to their ultimate deliverance. The narrative that most powerfully conveyed the theme of deliverance amidst destruction was the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

One of the most influential works of theology from the nineteenth century, Patrick Fairbairn's *The Typology of Scripture* (1847), contains a section entitled "The Two-fold Process: Salvation with Destruction." Fairbairn cited the Israelite Exodus as a chief example of the principle of salvation through destruction, noting in reference to the Red Sea that "its waters were the instrument of their temporal salvation, not simply by opening for them a way of escape, but also and chiefly by returning to immerse their enemies."⁴ The story of the exodus from Egypt was one of the best known biblical narratives at the time. It was one of the stories that, when referenced in sermons, preachers assumed their congregations were familiar with.⁵ Illustrated bibles from the early nineteenth century devoted attention to the various parts of the story—the finding of the baby Moses, Moses and the burning bush, the multiple plagues of Egypt, and the closing of the red sea on Pharaoh's armies, among others—rather than using a single image as emblematic of it, as was often done with other biblical stories. Along with being well known to the British populace, the Jewish exodus was regarded as having had special implications for modern Britain. Reverend Harvey Marriot described the exodus

⁴ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture, or, the Doctrine of Types ... Applied to the Explanation of the Earlier Revelations of God.*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh 1847), 1:229-30.

⁵ For example, see "Divinity: The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist," *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* Third Series, no. 3: 660.

in 1828 as “a matter intended by God for *our* warning and instruction.”⁶ The millennialist writer John Bayford echoed this sentiment, stating that “the deliverance of the children of Israel from Egypt was manifestly a figure of the latter-day deliverance.”⁷ The exodus narrative was considered to be one of the most pertinent parts of the Bible in the early nineteenth century since it was seen as containing lessons relevant to Britain’s future as a nation. Its actual relevance and its public familiarity made it a ripe subject for the visual arts.

It is important to recognize that for most nineteenth century spectators, the story of the exodus was fundamentally about freedom, liberation, and triumph even though it contains moments of tragedy and destruction. In an 1824 *Methodist Magazine* article an author recounted the violence of the plagues of Egypt and immediately followed them by commenting on how those plagues evince God’s “remarkable mercy” and “special kindness.”⁸ A poem from the *Evangelical Magazine* of 1830 entitled “The Tenth Plague,” contains this same juxtaposition. The early portion of the poem details the heartrending impact of the plagues sent by God:

Then o’er her young babe did the mother’s tears run,
As she prest to her bosom her first born son;
For it smiles they were fled and bereft of its breath,
It convulsively writhed in the tortures of death.

It is hard to conceive of a scene more tragic than a child “convulsively writh[ing] in the tortures of death” in its mother’s arms. Yet following this emotional stanza, wherein God

⁶ Harvey Marriott, *Eight Sermons on the Signs of the Times, Etc.* (London: Hatchard and Son, 1828), 95.

⁷ John Bayford, *Messiah's Kingdom, or, a Brief Inquiry Concerning What Is Revealed in Scripture, Relative to the Fact, the Time, the Signs, and the Circumstances of the Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ* (London, 1820), 311.

⁸ “Divinity: The Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist,” 660.

has smitten the first born child of every Egyptian, a different sentiment and tone pervades:

But Hark! On the wind rolls the voice of a song,
Now louder and louder it echoes along,
Still higher and higher the swelling notes rise,
Tis the paeon of multitudes piercing the skies,
. . . .
The men of that host are the children of Shem;
The fall of Egyptia is freedom to them;
No more shall the taskmaster torture his slave,
Nor the Hebrew be laid in the bondsman's vile grave.⁹

The poem emphasizes how the violence in this story punished the wicked and facilitated the liberation of God's chosen people—for “the Fall of Egyptia is freedom to them.” For both the ancient Israelite and modern Christian, the violence perpetrated by God on the Egyptians through the plagues, along with their ultimate demise in the Red Sea, were considered signs of God's mercy rather than evidence of his vengeance.

The Three Exodus Paintings

The powerful message of the story of the Israelite exodus combined with its broad familiarity among the British populace made it attractive to painters interested in dramatic biblical scenes. The subject had been approached earlier in the century by J.M.W. Turner (Figure 5.1). But real efflorescence occurred in the 1820s as three monumental canvases on the subject of the exodus were painted by John Martin, Francis Danby, and David Roberts. In 1824, three years after the success of his epic *Belshazzar's Feast*, Martin exhibited his depiction of *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (Figure 5.2). He painted the same narrative moment as Turner, although, as might be expected, he

⁹ “The Tenth Plague,” *The Evangelical Magazine* 38 (1830): 301-2, italics added.

aggrandized the scene to a greater degree. Martin's popular following and commercial success in the early 1820s inspired a number of other artists to follow in his footsteps and attempt to make their reputations with similar subjects and styles of painting. David Roberts presented *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* in 1829, and Francis Danby exhibited *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* in 1825 (Figures 5.3-6).¹⁰ Both artists painted in what was widely recognized as "the style of Martin," and they generally garnered the positive public sentiments Martin's works had. Yet while these artists painted in a similar style and chose the same biblical story for their subjects, each of the three artists painted different moments from the story. Each painting consequently emphasized different issues. At the same time, much like Martin's Mesopotamian Trilogy, these paintings share a visual coherence and a basic narrative structure that warrants a collective analytical approach. Thus, Martin's *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, and Roberts' *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* will be the focus of analysis in this chapter. As I explore the various themes each artist emphasized in his conception of the Israelite exodus, a coherent set of ideas will emerge that binds these works to one another and more broadly to reformist political discourses.

The fact that the narrative of the exodus was painted on 3 large-scale canvases within a five-year period suggests that the subject possessed special significance in the 1820s. The story of the exodus was, as previously suggested, commonly preached from the pulpit in large and small churches, often with an emphasis on the commonalities between the Israelites and the British people, a connection that I will explore later in the

¹⁰ As with the works by Martin in the previous chapter, I have included multiple versions of each painting simply because some of the details are harder to see in the photographs of the paintings themselves.

chapter. Yet the story also began to be used in a more secular and politicized manner in the early nineteenth century. For instance, it abounds in reformist political publications. The narrative lent itself to political interpretation because it was viewed fundamentally as a historical account of political liberation, despite its source in a religious text. One writer stated in 1830, “the veracity of Moses is . . . generally acknowledged to be unimpeachable, even by those who do not regard the Pentateuch as written by divine inspiration,” due to the inclusion of the Israelite exodus in other secular histories.¹¹ While from a twenty-first century perspective the miraculous nature of the story might place it firmly in the realm of myth, in the early nineteenth century the exodus was considered an incontestable historical event that resonated differently in religious and political arenas.

The exodus was a paradigmatic shift in the history of the Israelites that resulted in both the liberation of a captive people and the birth of a fundamentally new type of society. The broader narrative touched on some of the most pressing political issues of the 1820s—slavery, the oppression of the poor, and the obsession with unrestrained economic expansion. Most importantly, this new Israelite society carried symbolic weight for reformers because it contained a political structure believed to be designed by God himself. The social currency of the exodus narrative could have provided motivation to an artist seeking public approval, but more significantly, the exodus engaged a broad series of issues occupying the minds of British spectators in the early nineteenth century.

Due to the centrality of the biblical narrative in understanding these works, I have chosen to organize my analysis of the three paintings of exodus around the chronology of

¹¹ “Art. IV. The Veracity of the Five Books of Moses,” *Eclectic Review* 3, April (1830): 334.

the narrative moments they represent, rather than considering them in the temporal order in which they were made. My discussion will begin with Martin's representation of the Seventh Plague which comes first chronologically in the narrative; I will then consider Roberts's view of the Israelites leaving Egypt which follows the decimation of the plagues; finally, I will conclude with Danby's dramatic depiction of the Red Sea closing in on Pharaoh and his armies.

The previous chapter attempted to demonstrate that in Martin's Mesopotamian Trilogy, early nineteenth century spectators could see London's destiny in the destruction of ancient cities like Babylon and Nineveh. London was commonly referred to as Babylon, and the ideas surrounding the possible destruction of London during an impending apocalypse filtered through British society in the early decades of the century. The paintings also suggested reasons why these ancient cities, and by analogy modern London, were suffering the wrath of God; chief among them were the greed, excessive wealth, and luxurious living of the upper classes. I also argued that the pictorial structure of the paintings suggested the social rather than individual nature of such problems, and that the head of government possessed the ability and responsibility to enact reforms that would ensure heavenly protection. Those paintings located the blame for destruction but did not posit solutions to the problems. They left open the question as to what precisely the king of Babylon or of Nineveh should have done to gain the favor of God and secure protection from divine destruction.¹² The exodus paintings picture deliverance rather than destruction. Because they represent the positive inverse of that pictured in *The Fall*

¹² The beginnings of an answer were adumbrated in relation to the metaphorical associations of paganism, and in the general implications of the inverse of luxury being fundamentally positive, yet a much more complete and precise picture emerges when the Mesopotamian Trilogy is considered in conjunction with the exodus paintings.

of *Babylon* and *The Fall of Nineveh*, they allude to the actions that earn heavenly protection amidst the calamities sent by God.

John Martin's *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* in Context

John Martin first exhibited his painting of *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* to an “expectant and crowding public” at the inaugural exhibition of the Society for British Artists in 1823.¹³ This was a new artistic organization that had been formed that year, and reviews of its first exhibition were mixed, with many critics complaining that there were too many portraits and not enough history paintings on display.¹⁴ Yet one of the works that reviewers mentioned as an exception was *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*. The painting was described as “one of the very best performances of this artist” who “is without rival” when painting this type of subject.¹⁵ Another reviewer called it a “singular work” that was “executed with a power of pencil no less conspicuous than original.”¹⁶ The painting was purchased shortly after the exhibition opened for 500 guineas, a substantial sum for a painting at the time. Despite private ownership it continued to be placed on public display. It was exhibited in London the following year at a special exhibition of contemporary British artists that included works by Turner, Thomas Lawrence, Benjamin Haydon, and David Wilkie. In contrast to the Royal Academy exhibitions which commonly had over 1000 works on display, or the Society for British Artists exhibition which had roughly 750, this exhibition was limited to 141 works of

¹³ “Fine Arts,” *Examiner*, April 25 1824, 262.

¹⁴ “Society of British Artists,” *Literary Magnet of the Belles, Lettres, Science, and the Fine Arts* 1, no. 1 (1824): 307.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “Fine Arts,” *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 12, no. 41 (1824): 201.

only the most eminent living artists.¹⁷ *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* was also disseminated widely throughout British society in print form. A slightly altered version of the scene was included in Martin's large-scale steel mezzotint illustrated *Bible* issued in the 1830s; the image was also reproduced as a wood engraving in a number of cheaply produced annuals, in addition to the cheaply produced Westall and Martin illustrated *Bible*.¹⁸ The favorable public and critical response to the painting in two prominent exhibitions, and its widespread distribution in reproductive prints, points to the need to explore its resonance with broader issues in British society of the 1820s and 1830s.

Martin drew his subject from the ninth chapter of the book of Exodus. In the story, Moses had been instructed by the Lord to tell Pharaoh to release the enslaved Israelites, and upon Pharaoh's refusal, the Lord sent a series of plagues upon the Egyptians. Following each, Moses returned to Pharaoh and again asked that the Israelites be set free, yet Pharaoh's refusal invited another plague. This pattern was repeated multiple times. After six plagues, including rivers that turned to blood, infestations of frogs, flies, lice, and diseased livestock, Moses was instructed to call down a plague of hail. This is the narrative moment Martin chose to depict; it is stated in the biblical text as follows:

¹⁷ For an overview of the number of works on display at the Royal Academy, see Richard Redgrave and Samuel Redgrave, *A Century of Painters of the English School; with Critical Notices of Their Works, and an Account of the Progress of Art in England*, 2 vols. (London, 1866), 574. For information on the Society for British Artists exhibition numbers, see "Society of British Artists," 307. For information on the 1825 exhibition of contemporary British artists, see "Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence," *Belle Assemblée; or Court and fashionable magazine* 1, no. 6 (1825): 261.

¹⁸ John Hobart Caunter, Richard Westall, and John K. L. Martin, *Illustrations of the Bible by Westall and Martin, with Descriptions by the Rev. Hobart Caunter* (London: Edward Churton, 1835); *Forget-Me-Not, a Christmas and New Year's Present for 1828* (London: R. Ackerman, 1828), 203.

- 22) And the LORD said unto Moses, Stretch forth thine hand toward heaven, that there may be hail in all the land of Egypt, upon man, and upon beast, and upon every herb of the field, throughout the land of Egypt.
- 23) And Moses stretched forth his rod toward heaven: and the LORD sent thunder and hail, and the fire ran along upon the ground; and the LORD rained hail upon the land of Egypt.
- 24) So there was hail, and fire mingled with the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.
- 25) And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt all that was in the field, both man and beast; and the hail smote every herb of the field, and brake every tree of the field.
- 26) Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail

This precise moment of hail from above and fire from beneath provided the textual inspiration for Martin's painting.

In the composition Moses stands in the left foreground on a raised architectural landing with outstretched arms clutching a rod, as described in the biblical passage. At his side, his companion Aaron crouches in apparent fear and reverence at the miraculous scene before him. Directly above Moses and Aaron, streaks of dark rain and cloud descend from the sky like black daggers being thrust into the back of Egypt. In the center of the canvas the scene opens both to Egypt below and the sky above. On the ground, the storm-tossed, wrecked ships in the harbor evince the turmoil caused by the hailstorm. In contrast to this turmoil, bright white light shines down from above, piercing through the swirling vortex of darkness. The heavenly light illuminates monumental Egyptian architectural forms, including immense pyramids in the distance and a series of lengthy colonnades. The right side of the canvas is dominated by a characteristic feature of Martin's paintings—painted architecture—which here frames the cowering figure of Pharaoh and myriad Egyptian figures. By contrasting the minute figures spread across the architecture and the enormous Egyptian columns, colonnades, porticoes, layers of

terraces, a sense of urban magnificence is created. As one reviewer noted, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* combined “the most dreadful phenomena of nature, with gorgeous piles of architecture, ranges of temples, palaces, towers, which the devastating elements seem about to overwhelm in universal ruin. The whole scene is impressed with an appearance of awe and horror.”¹⁹ By this point in his career Martin’s was adept at representing dramatic storms and fantastic architectural spaces, such as those in *Belshazzar’s Feast*, *The Fall of Babylon* and *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still*, and many critics viewed this painting as characteristic Martin theatre. Beyond their sheer entertainment value, however, these elements took on alternative implications in the context of the early nineteenth century.

The Positive Plague: A Warning to the Nation

Martin’s painting includes multiple allusions to the merciful and liberating nature of God that were traditionally associated with this story, despite its theme of intense destruction. In an 1818 sermon on the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt, one Reverend Clowes preached, “Let us learn, therefore, to read in every scourge of human trouble, the language of an inconceivable mercy. . . . Let us leave to the folly of the Egyptian king the miserable of sophistry of explaining away the judgments of God . . . and of turning a deaf ear to the calls of heaven.”²⁰ The narrative itself is not simply one of destruction, but also of warning and deliverance. For a believing Christian, the plagues of Egypt were warnings to the Egyptians to avert ultimate punishment. The plagues were designed by God so as to avoid the greater punishment of annihilation. In

¹⁹ “Gallery of British Artists, Suffolk Street,” *Literary Chronicle* 6, no. 57 (1824): 253.

²⁰ J. Clowes, *Sermons on the Call and Deliverance of the Children of Israel out of Egypt*, Second ed. (Manchester: J. Gleave, Deansgate, 1818), 23.

Martin's painting the mercy of God is pictured in the form of a bright circle of light at the very center, which acts as a foil to the storm, abates its consequences, and pushes the destruction to the periphery of the canvas. At least one contemporary reviewer of a reproduction of the painting remarked on it representing the mercy of God rather than his wrath.²¹ A critic from *The Monthly Review* wrote:

The Israelite [Moses] looks, indeed, like a minister of heaven, rolling back the deluge and the tempest, which threatened the magnificent city before him with destruction, had not the obstinate king released the tribes from their bondage. The sun-light breaking through the overwhelming clouds, and flashing on the turbid waters; the pyramid in the distance dimly catching the return of the day; the mountains, and the more elevated buildings near them, already rejoicing in its gladness, and the crowds of human beings pouring forth the voice of gratitude for their unexpected deliverance, combine to fill up every part of this noble design with topics of the highest interest, and to impress it with a character of sublimity.²²

This critic identified two significant aspects of Martin's treatment of the subject that suggest a new set of meanings associated with it. First, the critic recognized that the destruction besetting Egypt was a result of the king's "obstinate" refusal to free the Israelites. Human agency caused the plague, not God. Second, this reviewer described Moses as "rolling back" the plague rather than as calling it down. From his or her perspective, Moses stood as the deliverer from destruction. This interpretation is supported by Martin's different conception of the subject in an early sketch of the scene, where Moses stands directly beneath the hail and lightning, seemingly calling it down (Figure 5.7). In the painting's final version, Moses is shifted to the left and instead of calling down the hail the figure seems to be communing with the light piercing through

²¹ As mentioned before, *The Seventh Plague* was re-produced as an engraving in a number of annuals, one of those being the *Forget-Me-Not* of 1828. This quote is taken from a review of the print contained in this publication.

²² "Book Review," *Monthly Review* 6, no. 27 (1827): 40.

the clouds. If Moses can be seen as pushing back the storms, as the critic perceived him to be, and as a conduit for sparing the Egyptians, he would assume his traditional role as the political representative of God on earth whose primary function was to deliver rather than destroy. These nuances were evidently appreciated by some members of the painting's original audience, though they are lost on many spectators today.

Moses as a Political Reformer

In *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* Martin subordinated Pharaoh to the visually dominating figure of Moses. Moses is larger than the protagonists in Martin's previous paintings, standing approximately twelve inches tall (Figure 5.8). The architecture also elevates and frames him. Moses stands on a platform separated by an architectural gap from the Egyptians on the right side of the canvas, his single figure counterbalancing their masses. The flow of light and dark in the sky above also focuses attention on Moses: the black shards of rain and hail angle down toward him while the diagonal movement of light culminates in his figure. The degree to which Moses is isolated and enlarged represented an alteration of the compositional strategy Martin had previously employed in his monumental works. As discussed in the previous chapter, the only recognizable figures in Martin's paintings of urban destruction were the guilty kings—Belshazzar in *The Fall of Babylon* and Sardanapalus in *The Fall of Nineveh*. Martin's Moses commands more visual attention than both Pharaoh and the aforementioned kings, as the figure sits virtually isolated in the left foreground. Pharaoh, Belshazzar and Sardanapalus are obscured to some degree by the crowds of subjects surrounding them, whereas in *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* Moses is flanked only by the crouching figure of

Aaron, whose bright white robes draw the viewer's eye to the dramatic figure of the prophet (Figures 5.9-10). Through these various visual devices, Martin represented Moses as a positive foil to political leaders like Belshazzar, Sardanapalus, and Pharaoh. The failures of those leaders, as amplified by the downfall of their civilizations, were precedents that Moses avoided: his leadership was to be emulated because he gained the favor of God and ultimately obtained protection for his followers.

In the 1820s Moses was represented in textual sources as a legislator as often as he was a prophet. He was rarely mentioned, even in religious contexts, without some allusion to his role as a political leader. In both religious and political publications, Moses was frequently referred to as “the Jewish legislator, historian and prophet,” “the first legislator of the Jews,” “the great legislator,” or “the Hebrew lawgiver.”²³ In Reverend Michael Russell's book on the history of the Jewish people (1827), the first chapter gave an overview of the civil and political constitutions of the ancient Hebrews under Moses's leadership; religion is not mentioned until the second chapter.²⁴ In *The Examiner's* description of Martin's painting, the author described the foreground figures of Moses and Aaron as “the supernaturally gifted Hebrew leaders,” rather than Moses and Aaron, thereby sublimating their prophetic role to their political one.²⁵ The fundamentally political nature of the ancient prophet is crucial to an understanding of the resonances of Martin's painting in the early nineteenth century.

²³ Mrs. Sherwood, *Bible History, or Scripture Its Own Interpreter Illustrated from the Birth, to the Death of Moses* (Loneon: Knight and Lacey, 1823), 33; “The Bible,” *The Co-operator*, no. 26 (1830): 3; *The British Critic* 5 (1816): 119.; “On Miracles,” *The Republican* 14, no. 20 (1826): 612, 16.

²⁴ Michael Russell, *A Connection of Sacred and Profane History* (London: Printed for C. & J. Rivington, 1827).

²⁵“Exhibition of the Society of British Artists,” *The Examiner* (1824): 276.

Moses also began to be associated with a distinct type of politics during the nineteenth century. In the two decades after *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* was exhibited, Moses and the exodus narrative appeared in the writings of early socialists such as Karl Marx and Moses Hess.²⁶ An echo of these radical political associations was still made in the early the twentieth century in Lincoln Steffens's defense of Leninist politics, entitled "Moses in Red."²⁷ One political philosopher has noted that not only does the exodus story "loom large in the literature of revolution" but that "exodus has often been imagined as a program for revolution," with Moses positioned as a political leader.²⁸ Eventually canonized by Hess and Marx as a progressive political figure, Moses's political connotations and their relationship to social reforms began to germinate during the early decades of the century.

Moses was regarded as a prototype for many Christian reformers during the early years of the century. When searching for a biblical example on which to base the idea of a religiously inspired political reformation, reformers recognized Moses's symbolic potency. Two of the most important reformers of the early nineteenth century, Thomas Spence and Robert Owen, were described by their followers as modern incarnations of "the Hebrew Legislator." In 1817 the radical journal *The Black Dwarf* called Robert Owen "a new creator to stand forward with a rod of power, more powerful than that of Moses."²⁹ In 1825 a pro-reform author remarked that "every reformer of human opinion is sure to undergo the fate of Moses in the wilderness; for no sooner shall he have led men out of the gorgeous appearances and rich delusions of superstition" then they will

²⁶ Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 6.

²⁷ Lincoln Steffens, *Moses in Red: The Revolt of Israel as a Typical Revolution* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1926).

²⁸ Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution*, 1.

²⁹ *The Black Dwarf*, no. 20 August (1817): 469.

“long to turn back to the ‘flesh-pots’ of their intellectual Egypt.”³⁰ Thomas Spence praised Moses repeatedly in his works, and envisioned himself in the guise of Moses, as a legislator sent to proclaim the news of freedom and economic equality.³¹ Spence’s successor Thomas Evans elaborated further on the analogy in his *Christian Policy*, describing Moses as one of the three saviors in history, along with Jesus and King Alfred the Great.³²

Moses’s biography made him a powerful political symbol. The exodus narrative describes him as being raised within the institutions of Egyptian power and as then opposing the very system that had offered him personal comfort, convenience, and power. Consequently, he seemed the ideal figure of a reformer. He was also willing to use violence to deliver his people from oppression. In his extremely popular two-penny journal *The Political Register*, the influential radical writer William Cobbett lauded this quality specifically: “Moses resisted oppression in the only way that resistance was within his power. He knew that his countrymen had no chance in any court; he knew that petitions against oppressions were all in vain,” and thus “he resolved to begin the only sort of resistance that was left him,” that is, violence.³³ In 1816 when this was published, the readership of Cobbett’s journal was estimated at 200,000, making it more widely read

³⁰ “On the Spirit of Monachism,” *The Oriental Herald and Colonial Review* 7, no. 23 (1825): 241.

³¹ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 63-4; Peter Linebaugh, “Jubilating; or, How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee against Capitalism and with Some Success,” *Radical History Review* 50 (1991): 173.

³² Thomas Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy* (London: published for the author, 1816). King Alfred the Great reigned in Britain from 871-899. Considered to be one of the greatest English kings, in fact, the only king to be given the moniker “the Great,” Alfred became famous for protecting England from Viking invaders, for instituting a new code of laws, and for his fostering of scholarship.

³³ William Cobbett, “To the Journeymen and Labourers of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland,” *Cobbett's Political Register* 31, no. 18 (1816): 556.

than any other newspaper or periodical.³⁴ Cobbett was not overtly religious, but he employed the language of religion, and particularly the example of Moses, to explain and justify his political positions. As Cobbett pointed out, when peaceful political options were cut off, Moses led a violent revolution at the behest of God. By placing such a politically charged figure at the center of his painting, Martin engaged the radical political discourses into which Moses was rhetorically woven.

The Conjunction of God and Man in Relation to Apocalyptic Progressivism

The role that Moses plays in Martin's painting also is significant in relation to what I earlier referred to in this study as "apocalyptic progressivism"—the belief that progressive political policies offered protection from the catastrophes of the coming apocalypse. In *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, Martin presented Moses working in conjunction with God to facilitate political deliverance: the "Hebrew lawgiver" acts as an intercessory figure who enables God's will to be carried out on earth, even though God sent plagues upon the people. This conjoining of God's providence and human agency was symbolically potent for those reformers who might be called "apocalyptic progressives." Most individuals who believed in the imminence of the apocalypse and millennium were qualified as either pre- or post-millennialists, as discussed earlier. Both of these categories defined the roles of man and God in ushering in these events in straightforward terms. Pre-millennialists saw the process as apparently out of the control of human agency and solely in the grasp of Providence, while post-millennialists viewed man as the sole instigator of the millennium and denied God an active role in its onset.

³⁴ See James P. Huzel, *The Popularization of Malthus in Early Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 109; Jon P. Klancher, *The Making of English Reading Audiences, 1790-1832* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 101.

Yet many who did not fit neatly into these categories saw a conjunction between God's providence and mankind's agency as central to the fate of humanity. In essence, "apocalyptic progressivism" depended on a belief that human nature could be transformed through a reformation of the political and social order.³⁵ By definition, this line of thought depended on a cooperation between the agency of man and God—the type of cooperation pictured in Martin's painting, in which Moses stretches his holy rod toward God's light in the heavens.

By picturing man working with God to destroy the Egyptian oppressors and, by implication, free the Israelite captives, the rhetoric of the painting mirrors that used by many reformers. Richard Price and Joseph Priestly, two of the influential apocalyptic progressive reformers discussed in Chapter Three, each saw this conjunction of providence and agency as pivotal to the future onset of the millennium. Political scientist Jack Fruchtman notes that according to the world view of Price and Priestly,

The single stimulative force in history was Providence, but it was a Providence than never acted alone in history. God acted through his created instruments, men, who would make deliberative political changes to improve their own lot and to enhance the conditions for the coming glory.³⁶

Price and Priestly's emphasis on the role of mankind's action was later promoted by Christian reformers such as Thomas Spence and John Minter Morgan. Spence implied that "the Second coming . . . will be contingent upon humanity securing balanced democratic government, an obligation divinely ordained."³⁷ Morgan emphasized the need for progressive legislation on the grounds that it provided evidence of the

³⁵ Bromley, "Constructing Apocalypticism: Social and Cultural Elements of Radical Organization," 36.

³⁶ Jack Fruchtman, *Apocalyptic Politics of Richard Price and Joseph Priestley: A Study in Late Eighteenth-Century English Republican Millennialism* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1983), 24.

³⁷ Malcolm Chase, "From Millennium to Anniversary: The Concept of Jubilee in Late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century England," *Past and Present* 129, no. 1 (1990): 56.

collaboration between man and God. While some argued that God left legislation to man alone, and others argued that providence controlled everything, Morgan claimed that it was “the plan of providence that Christianity should produce its effects gradually, and in cooperation with the efforts of human reason and the improvement of knowledge; leaving room for the exertions of mankind to carry into effect its divine suggestions.” He concluded that this conjoining of the will of God and man would facilitate an “increased knowledge of human nature” which would ultimately manifest itself in “the art of governing.”³⁸ This picturing of man as a facilitator of God’s providence provided the theological basis for Christian-inspired reformation. The specific doctrines and accompanying legislative policies implied in the exodus narrative will be discussed in my analysis of the paintings of Danby and Roberts; but before turning to their works, I want to note the politics associated with Martin’s methods of exhibition and how they may have also impacted the political associations of his painting.

The Politics of Unorthodox Exhibition

From 1816-1828 Martin exhibited his works almost entirely in exhibitions run by institutions that positioned themselves in opposition to the conservative Royal Academy, a factor which contributed to their ability to evoke reformist politics. As mentioned previously, the relationship between Martin and the Royal Academy of Art in Britain was tense and at times openly confrontational. Martin rarely exhibited at the Royal Academy due to the unfortunate incident in his early career when the dark can of varnish was spilt down the center of the canvas. Martin became mortified when he attended the exhibition

³⁸ John Minter Morgan, *The Christian Commonwealth, to Which Is Added an Inquiry Respecting Private Property [from a Periodical of 1827]* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850), 135.

near the end of its run and saw his tainted painting on display. Despite protestations to the contrary from Royal Academy officials, Martin was convinced it had been done intentionally by those academicians who felt threatened by him.³⁹ Benjamin West, President of the Royal Academy, sent his son to apologize to Martin, but the latter continued to harbor a grudge toward the academy for the rest of his life. This incident led Martin to opt for presenting his works to the public in rather unorthodox ways, including exhibitions organized by groups outside of the Royal Academy, supplemented by the occasional one-man show.

By exhibiting outside of the Royal Academy Martin's works engaged segments of the public that tended to be less conservative than those who attended the Royal Academy Exhibition. By the early nineteenth century the Royal Academy had become embroiled in political debates. Artists at the time were "quick to construct analogies between the political process and disputes in the London art world," with the Academy symbolizing "an oligarchic conception of art politics" which facilitated the transfer of "the language of political radicalism to artistic culture."⁴⁰ This characterization of the Royal Academy as a bastion of political oppression allowed for alternative art exhibitions to position themselves as its positive inverse.

In 1823 a group of artists set on countering the authoritarianism of the Royal Academy founded The Society of British Artists and mounted a rival art exhibition that was headlined by Martin's *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*. From the outset the Society emphasized its political contrast with the Royal Academy. In a letter written by the painter John Linton laying out the foundations of the new group, he wrote that the

³⁹ "Mr. John Martin," *The Illustrated London News*, March 7 1849.

⁴⁰ Holger Hoock, *The King's Artists: The Royal Academy of Arts and the Politics of British Culture, 1760-1840*, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 149.

principles upon which the Society would be founded “are broad and liberal, without any exclusive privileges or distinctions.”⁴¹ The popular press described the Society as “the Republic of arts.”⁴² By implication, the language of independence, liberty, and republicanism stood in contrast to the supposed oppression, conservatism, and autocracy of the Royal Academy. A reviewer of the Society of Artists exhibition wrote in 1829 that those working at his journal were “far from being radical in politics, but we confess ourselves to be a little so in art, and therefore we have always been glad of the success of the Institution, in opposition to the aristocratic and exclusive establishment at Somerset house.”⁴³ The reviewer’s protestations notwithstanding, his statement reveals an assumed link between alternative spaces of display and alternative politics. While this does not mean that every work in these exhibitions carried radical political connotations, it does mean that on the whole the public who visited these exhibitions was less conservative than those at the Royal Academy. The type of public who attended such exhibitions would by comparison have been more likely to be sympathetic with reformist political positions and more aware of the correspondences of Martin’s works to reformist political themes and imagery.

Francis Danby and David Roberts: “In the Style of Martin”

John Martin’s fame and financial successes in the early 1820s prompted a range of reactions from other artists in Britain. Some were disgusted at his lack of academic

⁴¹ “Letter from John Pye to W. Linton, June 20th,” (1823). Letter reproduced in William T. Whitley, *Art in England, 1821-1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1930), 52-53.

⁴² “The Society of British Artists and Their New Rooms Now Building in Suffolk Street, Pall Mall East,” *European Magazine and London Review* 84 (1823): 150-51.

⁴³ “Fine Arts,” *New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal* 27, no. 101 (1829): 205.

training, which seemed most apparent in his representation of the human form. Others, perhaps jealous at his popular success, condemned his work as virtual theater rather than fine art. Still others “plunged [their] plowshare into the same soil” as Martin in the hope that it would facilitate their artistic rise.⁴⁴ The two artists best known in the 1820s for painting in “the style of Martin” were Francis Danby and David Roberts. Though each artist later in his career concentrated on landscape painting, eliminating overt references to narratives, they both produced Martin-inspired biblical canvases in the decade that coincided with the height of Martin’s popularity. Critics often attacked them for imitating Martin, yet Danby and Roberts garnered the same type of popular praise and attention as he enjoyed. One reviewer called Danby’s *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* (1825) “one of the most extraordinary pictures ever painted,” while another critic described Roberts’s *Departure of the Israelites* (1829) as “impossible not to be struck with.”⁴⁵ Both paintings elicited popular acclaim and professional advancement for their makers: Danby was elected in 1826 into the Royal Academy as an Associate, and Roberts was elected the President of the Society of British Artists in 1831.

In addition, Danby’s and Roberts’s paintings entered the collective imagination of the British populace through broadly distributed prints. Martin had become successful by selling engravings of his works during the 1820s, and Danby and Roberts followed suit by producing engravings of or after their works as well. On an even more popular level, Danby’s and Roberts’s paintings were both featured as wood-engraved frontispieces in *The Saturday Magazine*, a cheap Christian alternative to the popular *Penny Magazine*.

⁴⁴ “Fine Arts: Suffolk Street Gallery,” *Literary Gazette* 636, no. Mar. 28 (1829): 212.

⁴⁵ “Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence,” 261.; “Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence,” *Belle Assemblée; or Court and fashionable magazine*, 53 (1829): 223.

The Saturday Magazine rarely featured history paintings on its cover, generally opting for generic views of cathedrals or foreign landscapes, yet in 1832 they made an exception for Roberts's *The Departure of Israelites out of Egypt* (Figure 5.11). The next year, the magazine featured Danby's work, citing the popularity of the Roberts's piece as the reason for commissioning a wood engraving after Danby's painting (Figure 5.12). Roberts's painting was also turned into a large-scale diorama that was displayed, along with a diorama of Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*, in London and New York. Following the exhibition in New York the *American Monthly Magazine* called Roberts's diorama "the most magnificent painting that has ever been exhibited in the United States."⁴⁶ In all three cases, these paintings of the exodus subject were viewed by thousands of spectators at major art exhibitions and were additionally purchased by well-off collectors as steel plate engravings, viewed by tens of thousands who saw the illustrated covers of penny magazines, and gazed at as massive public spectacles.

David Roberts *The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt* in Context

In 1824 a relatively unknown stage-painter named David Roberts exhibited a modest landscape painting as his first foray into the realm of fine art. It hung in the Society of British Artists exhibition along with Martin's *Seventh Plague of Egypt*. Though Roberts's early successes were limited and required him to continue employment as a stage painter, he made a splash in 1829 with his first large-scale history painting, *The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt* (Figure 5.3). The story of the exodus had already proven to be fertile ground for Martin and Danby, and Roberts decided to paint a more

⁴⁶ "The Fine Arts, Literature, Science, the Drama, &C.," *The American Monthly Magazine* IV, no. IV (1835): 285.

subdued, yet intensely dramatic scene. Rather than focusing on a moment of miraculous intervention, Roberts depicted the Israelites in a crowded procession funneling out of the great city they had helped construct. As if perched atop city walls, the viewer of Roberts's painting looks down with a bird's eye view over the city onto a broad boulevard flooded by the newly freed Israelites. On each side of the boulevard, multi-colored columns create lengthy terraces that in turn support thousands of Egyptian onlookers. Egyptian statuary, monumental pillars, grand entrances, vast porticoes, and great pyramids cover the left hand side of the scene. In the sky the morning sun illuminates the scene in the distance and casts much of the foreground in shadow. Apart from the sky and the elevated walkway in the foreground, every inch of the canvas is packed full of architecture and figures, creating a sort of visual claustrophobia. Martin's paintings were characterized by towering architectural forms and thousands of tiny figures; Roberts took that formula to new extremes in *The Departure of the Israelites*.

The reviews of Roberts's painting emphasized two features: the unique way it represented masses of Israelites and the dramatic impact of the architecture. Whereas the drama in Martin's paintings was often conveyed through convulsions of nature, Roberts's composition was more subdued and created drama through scale, figures, depth, and monumental architecture. In what follows, I want to suggest that Roberts's painting represented the Israelites in the guise of a modern nation, while the monumental architecture alluded to their former role as slaves. Both ideas played a part in apocalyptic progressive ideology. By representing Israel as a modern nation Roberts's work emphasized the parallels between the chosen nation of Israel and the possible chosen status of modern Britain; by alluding to issues of slavery and freedom, Roberts's work

evoked a salient contemporary political issue that was significantly influenced by Christian theology and morality.

Israel as a Nation

One unique aspect of Roberts's work is his virtual elimination of the major actors in the biblical story in favor of crowds that line a grand boulevard. Both Pharaoh and Moses appear in the foreground of the painting, though they are difficult to locate as neither are given the type of delineated space or enlarged scale that the Moses figure had in Martin's *Seventh Plague of Egypt*. In Roberts's painting, Pharaoh's small seated figure is arrayed in glorious robes and golden decorations that cause him to merge with his lavish surroundings, almost camouflaging him in the scene. Moses's figure is only slightly more visible in the right middle ground of the painting, as it is turned away from the viewer and covered entirely in shadow. Moses is reduced to a small silhouette with upraised arms, holding a rod to indicate his identity. To see either figure, the viewer has to inspect the painting up close attentively, whereas the crowd of Israelites leaving Egypt *en masse* would be visible to all onlookers. The perspective, the lighting, and the architectural elements all lead the viewer's eye down onto the broad boulevard flooded with Israelites. This elevation of the Israelites as the key subject in the painting, at the expense of the king and the prophet-legislator, and the conception of the Israelites as a single mass, significantly alters the political connotations of the scene.

Roberts's painting suggests that the Israelites left Egypt as a unified nation. Rather than appearing as a disheveled conglomeration of downtrodden peoples, as one might expect a recently oppressed people to appear, Roberts presents them with the

accoutrements of modern nation-hood. They carry flags, banners, and ensigns on their way out of the city, which are some of the more striking details in the painting (Figure 5.13). This sense of a unified people is also emphasized by its seeming movement in unison across the canvas. A number of critics noted this phenomenon in their exhibition reviews. The *Literary Gazette* wrote that the painting contains a “multitude of human beings actuated by one great impulse.”⁴⁷ The *Belle Assemblée* claimed it to be “impossible” that “the effect of immense masses of people could be given upon canvas with greater accuracy,” adding that “those masses appear almost to possess the attribute of motion.”⁴⁸ The *Saturday Magazine* used the phrase “continuous mass of Israelites” to express the effect created in the center of the canvas.⁴⁹ The *New Monthly Magazine* described how the sensation is great from a distance, but as the canvas is approached “a spectator finds that what appears to be a multitude of human beings is merely a number of dabs of color, without shape or form, he becomes astonished, as a very trifling distance converts them into an animated crowd.”⁵⁰ The crowd of Israelites is described by these various reviewers as “animated,” in “motion,” “continuous,” and “actuated by one great impulse”—all alluding to the way the Israelites seemed to come to life as a unified body in motion. This sense of unified movement among the Israelites, combined with the flags as markers of modern nationalism, produces a representation of Israel as a single nation.

The significance of this conception lies in the rhetorical connections made between ancient Israel and Britain in the early nineteenth century. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Babylon was often invoked as a metaphor for modern Britain. At the

⁴⁷ *Literary Gazette* 801 (1832): 330.

⁴⁸ “Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence,” 223.

⁴⁹ “The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt,” *Saturday Magazine* 1, no. 5 (1832): 33.

⁵⁰ “Fine Arts,” 206.

same time, many commentators also related Britain to the ancient nation of Israel. In contrast to Babylon, Nineveh, and Egypt, Israel was an elect society of God. It gained heavenly protection amidst calamity rather than suffering the effects of those calamities. Many people believed that the destiny of modern Britain was connected, either through genealogy or metaphor, to the children of Israel. This linkage provided the basis of hope contained in apocalyptic progressive thought. Israel was the key example of an exception to the destruction sent by God. Apocalyptic progressivism maintained that while calamities would accompany the apocalypse, it was possible for Britain to assume the role of the Israelites during the modern era and receive heavenly protection.

This brings us to some important considerations in relation to Roberts's work. First, we must consider the ways in which Israel was posited in religious and political discourses as a prototype for modern Britain. Second, we must ascertain the means by which Britain could transform their society so as to engender the protection of God and become like the children of Israel. Much like the paintings of urban downfall, the paintings of exodus presented British audiences with a choice: viewers were implicitly asked to decide whether Britain would become like Babylon or Israel. Apocalyptic progressive adherents believed that Britain might become the modern incarnation of ancient Israel through the implementation of Christian-inspired reforms. More specifically, the types of reforms they promoted tended to mirror those found in the government of "the great legislator" Moses. The hope was that modern Britain might also be the elect nation of God that would be delivered rather than destroyed.

Britain as Israel

Early nineteenth century writers figured Britain as a modern type for ancient Israel in both literal and metaphorical terms. While the metaphorical connection was probably more widespread and convincing, it should be noted that many people considered the British literally to be descendants of the Israelites. “British-Israelism,” as it came to be known, asserted that the founding of Great Britain was intertwined with Jewish history—specifically the “scattered” or “lost” ten tribes of Israel. Some of these tribes were believed to have wandered north to the British Isles and therefore the blood of Israel coursed through British veins. This idea had been propagated in the late eighteenth century by the famous apocalyptic preacher and visionary Richard Brothers. At the height of his influence in the 1790s, Brothers claimed to be a descendant of “the house of David” and argued that much of Britain was descended from the lost Jewish tribes. This idea spread and was eventually concretized by John Wilson in *Lectures on Our Israelitish Origin*, published in 1840.⁵¹ The scope and impact of British-Israelism became even more significant in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the idea was already part of the public discourse when the paintings by Martin, Danby, and Roberts under consideration here were conceived and shown.

Belief in the metaphorical connections between ancient Israel and modern Britain were far more prevalent. Religious and secular leaders from a range of political persuasions cited sources to assert the confluence of these two societies and thus posit the possibility of Britain’s deliverance amidst catastrophe. Some viewed Britain’s role in the Protestant reformation as an example of her chosen status as a modern day Israel. In

⁵¹ John Wilson, *Lectures on Ancient Israel, and the Israelitish Origin of the Modern Nations of Europe*, 3rd. ed. (Cheltenham, 1840).

1810 Claudius Buchanan preached that “at the present era Great Britain stands conspicuous in the eyes of the world... and has become, by Divine Providence, the constituted Guardian, in a manner, of the religion and liberties of men.” He taught that “Great Britain’s survival was as directly providential as God’s protection of Israel.”⁵² Many pointed to Britain’s immunity from the ravages of the Napoleonic wars as evidence that they had been “delivered” from tyranny in the manner of the Israelites. In an 1817 sermon, Christopher Wordsworth referred to the French Revolution when he claimed,

No hostile foe was permitted to tread our plains... our country seemed to have been called by divine providence to be the asylum and sanctuary of whatever liberty, loyalty, independence, and patriotism, yet remained in the world, to issue forth at a brighter day, for the revival and healing of the nations.⁵³

In the 1820s Reverend George Croly, who was a close friend of John Martin and would later write the text for Roberts’s illustrated books on the Holy Land, also cited Britain’s protection from external invasion during the French Revolution as evidence of its chosen status. While preaching about Britain’s future in the midst of the apocalypse, Croly said:

The fate of our own country in this visitation may well exercise that deepest interest of piety and human nature. She may well be severely tried; it is scarcely conceivable that in so vast and extent of suffering she should remain untouched. But she has been hitherto sustained in a manner little short of a miracle. In the fearful trial which has so lately passed upon Europe, England was of all nations placed in the most direct road of peril. In the revolutionary race we had the natural means, and hereditary powers, the right, to have flung even France behind; a more democratic constitution, a more democratic spirit than any other monarchical people;... yet from this unrivaled peril England was saved and more than saved; raised to be successively the refuge, the champion, and the leader of the civilized world.⁵⁴

⁵² Rev. Claudius Buchanan, *Three Sermons on the Jubilee, Preached at Welbeck Chapel, London* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1810), 42.

⁵³ Christopher Wordsworth, *The Expostulation of Moses against the Murmurings of Israel a Warning to England. A Sermon [on Deut. Iv. 9]* (London: F.C. & J. Rivington, 1817), 17-18.

⁵⁴ Rev. George Croly, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: C. & J. Rivington, 1827), 439-40.

Croly's statement placed Britain under the divine protection of God, but not necessarily through super-human means. Rather than the opening of a Red Sea, Croly cited the "more democratic" form of government as the God-given gift which enabled England to be saved. It is crucial to recognize that although the miraculous emancipation of the Israelites from Egypt was constantly proposed as a type for modern Britain, the otherworldly aspects of their deliverance were often translated into more concrete and prescient political terms when positing Britain's possible deliverance.

David Bogue made another telling statement in his widely popular tract *On Universal Peace*, which was based on an 1813 sermon and republished many times during the 1820s and 1830s. Bogue employed reason to assert the logic of Britain's future deliverance and its connection to ancient Israel:

Is it at all unreasonable to suppose that a nation living under the influence of the spirit of the Gospel . . . would experience the peculiar protection of the great governor of the world? How remarkable in this respect was his care over Israel of old, when they faithfully kept his covenant and his testimonies! . . . is it irrational to conceive, that *if* any one country were to be regulated in all its domestic measures, and in all its foreign relations, by the spirit of the Gospel, it would be the peculiar charge of God, and enjoy the smiles of his approbation, and the guardianship of his providence—in a degree hitherto unknown since the commencement of the Christian era, because such Christian conduct in a government has been unknown? Individuals will have rewards and punishments dispensed to them in a future state—but fair, nations as such, will have no existence. Is it improper then to argue, that virtuous and pious nations will consequently have their reward in the present world?⁵⁵

Based on the prototype of ancient Israel, Bogue concluded that only a country "regulated in its domestic measures, and in all its foreign relations, by the spirit of the gospel" could obtain the protection of "the great governor of the world." He further stated that it would

⁵⁵ David D. D. Bogue, *On Universal Peace; Being Extracts from a Discourse Delivered in October 1813*, Society for the Promotion of Permanent and Universal Peace. Tract. No. 6 (London: Bensley and Son, 1819), 13.

be “Christian conduct in government” that would facilitate the British nation’s deliverance.

This emphasis on government reform as the mechanism by which Britain could mirror ancient Israel is a key component in understanding the impact of monumental paintings of the exodus. The idea was not confined to conservative political circles. The radical publication *The Medusa* reported after Peterloo that the day of retributive justice could be forestalled if the English government did “works meet for repentance.”⁵⁶ Each of these writers—Croly, Bogue, and the *Medusa* correspondent—cited government as the key component in either gaining the favor of God or losing it. It is also important to note the conditional nature of these statements. For instance, Bogue carefully inserted the word “if” before describing what a country might do to obtain God’s divine protection. In this theoretical program Britain is not guaranteed its place as the elect of God; rather they could become such through “Christian conduct in government.”

But what did “Christian conduct in government” mean in the 1820s, when Roberts, Danby, and Martin were exhibiting their paintings of the deliverance of the Israelites? If Britain could only become a modern incarnation of the ancient Israelites through implementing Christian-based government reforms, what precisely were those reforms? No doubt many saw a continued repression of Roman Catholicism as central to their understanding of a proper Christian government. Others looked to the history of monarchy and asserted it to be perfectly in line with Christian principles of governance. But the most significant and successful implementation of Christian principles into

⁵⁶ *The Medusa*, 24 April 1819.

government policy in the early nineteenth century came in response to another social ill alluded to in Roberts's painting—slavery.

Stone Testaments to Slavery

The reviewers of Roberts's painting were particularly struck by the dramatic architecture of Egypt in *The Departure of the Israelites*, as noted earlier. Akin to Martin's *Belshazzar's Feast*, in Roberts's painting the architecture itself becomes a major actor in the scene. The architecture was described by critics as "remarkable for its distinctness, force, and truth," and "replete with grandeur."⁵⁷ Another reviewer described the architecture as producing "an overpowering effect" upon viewers.⁵⁸ In the *Saturday Magazine* the author described "the admiration we have felt in musing upon this wondrous scene, letting the eye swim, as it were, over sculptured temple and tower."⁵⁹ For most nineteenth century viewers the repeated columns and colonnades stacked one upon another were a prime attraction in the painting. Yet there is a danger of minimizing the significance of these forms by describing them simply as attractions. The juxtaposition of such massive buildings with the crowds of departing Israelites called to mind the slave labor that had built the grandiose architecture. A review in the *Morning Journal* described the painting as representing "the tens of thousands of the chosen people depart[ing] from the house of bondage, arrayed in the borrowed jewels of their masters, who gaze on them with fear and anxiety from the rich palaces of their

⁵⁷ "Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence," 223; "Fine Arts: Suffolk Street Gallery," 212.

⁵⁸ "Exhibition of the Society of British Artists," *Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle* 76 (1829): 222.

⁵⁹ "The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt," 34.

masters.”⁶⁰ As this reviewer noted, the narrative of the painting is fundamentally about the freeing of an enslaved people, a reading which would have been available to most early nineteenth century viewers. The slavery of the Israelites is also emphasized by the visualized extremes of class difference—the “rich palaces” of the masters in counterbalance with the “borrowed jewels” the Israelites wear. Roberts’s work compels the viewer to think about the issue of slavery by juxtaposing the Israelites with the immense “rich palaces” they labored to build.

While the foreground is dominated by extensive colonnades, Roberts included the pyramids of Egypt prominently on the horizon. At this time the pyramids were largely considered as markers of slavery, or “monuments of the miseries of their erection,” as much as they were wonders of the world.⁶¹ One author described the pyramids as nothing more than “huge piles of brick or stone, with square bases and triangular sides, reared by slaves for tyrants to moulder in.”⁶² Voltaire published what was probably the most widely-read opinion on the subject in his *Philosophical Dictionary* (1764), where he wrote, “These very pyramids are monuments of their slavery, for the whole nation must have been made to work on them, otherwise such unwieldy masses could never have been finished.”⁶³ C. F. Volney’s *On the Ruins of Empires* (1793) offered a personal account of witnessing dramatic Egyptian architecture:

Elevated as we are with so exalted a proof of the power of man, when we consider the purpose for which these amazing works were intended, we cannot but view them with regret. We lament, that to construct a useless sepulcher, a whole nation should have been rendered miserable for twenty years: we shudder at the

⁶⁰ Cited in William Cosmo Monkhouse, *Masterpieces of English Art, with Sketches of Some of the Most Celebrated of the Deceased Painters of English School from the Time of Hogarth to the Present Day. Illustrated with Twenty-Six Photographs* (London, 1869), 148.

⁶¹ “Book Review,” *Metropolitian Magazine*, June 1842, 41.

⁶² “Antiquity,” *Chambers Edinburgh Journal* IV, no. 184 (1835): 221.

⁶³ M. De Voltaire, *The Philosophical Dictionary* (New York: George H. Evans, 1830), 7.

numberless acts of injustice and oppression the tiresome labors must have cost, in conveying, preparing, and piling up such an immense mass of stones' and we are inflamed with indignation at the tyranny of the despots who enforced these barbarous works, a sentiment indeed which too frequently recurs on viewing the different monuments of Egypt. Those labyrinths, temples, and pyramids, by their huge a heavy structure attest much less to the genius of a nation, opulent and friendly to the arts, than the servitude of a people who were slaves to the caprices of their monarchs.⁶⁴

The pyramids of Egypt, and for that matter all monumental Egyptian architecture, including “its labyrinths” and “temples,” alluded to the substantial number of slaves required to build such large structures. Rather than viewing these monuments with admiration, these authors focused on the utter uselessness of such buildings; their descriptions revealed the pyramids to be little more than monstrous stone witnesses to the whims of foolish monarchs and the existence of slave labor in Egypt. Most people believed that it was in fact the Israelite slaves who constructed the pyramids.⁶⁵ This belief was depicted in numerous works over the course of the nineteenth century that pictured the Israelites building the pyramids, such as Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld’s *The Servitude and Distress of the Israelites in Egypt*, which was reproduced in his popular illustrated Bible, or Edward Poynter’s iconic painting *Israel in Egypt* (Figures 5.14-15). At this point in time, the representation of the pyramids and the other large Egyptian architectural forms would have connoted the idea of Israelite slavery.

⁶⁴ Constantin Francois de Count Volney, *The Ruins, or, a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires. With Notes Historical, Geographical and Explanatory*. (London: T. Davison, 1819), 283.

⁶⁵ William Carpenter, *The Biblical Companion: Or, an Introduction to the Reading and Study of the Holy Scriptures ... Compiled from the Best Authors ... And Adapted for Popular Use* (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1836), 454.

Ancient and Modern Abolition

At the time, this reminder of slavery in the ancient world would have recalled the heated political debate over African slavery in the new world. Parallels were often drawn between Israelite slavery and modern African slavery.⁶⁶ Abolitionist Esther Copley wrote in 1836 that “the slavery of the Israelites in Egypt appears to have been a more exact counterpart of Negro slavery than any other age or nation has produced.”⁶⁷ Not only did Roberts’ painting allude to the general history of slavery, but to current forms of enslavement, which were hotly contested in Britain at the time.

The issue of slavery had been a part of the public discourse in Britain for decades, but debate intensified in the late 1820s and early 1830s. The slave trade in the British colonies had been outlawed in 1807 yet the goals of the abolitionists were not fully satisfied until 1833, when the “Abolition of Slavery Act” was passed that ended slavery in British territories as well. A key aspect of the push for abolition was its religious basis. The abolition movement was driven by Quakers, Evangelicals, and other religious people who cited the Bible as the basis for their political arguments. Abolitionists commonly referred to slavery as a national sin, and one that might prohibit Britain from obtaining the protection of divine providence. It was, in other words, a sin which might turn the British into the equivalents of the Egyptians or Babylonians rather than the Israelites. The *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* in 1822 wrote that

the Legislature of our country has again proclaimed its abhorrence of the traffic in slaves . . . Happily, this great national sin is removed from us... how little progress can be made in a return to right practice, where the body of the people is unenlightened and uninfluenced by the principles of true Christianity.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ See Ibid.

⁶⁷ Esther Copley, *A History of Slavery, and Its Abolition* (London: The Sunday School Union, 1836), 28.

⁶⁸ “Christian Retrospect,” *The Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* 1822.

As with the preachers Bogue and Croly mentioned earlier, this writer also subscribed to the idea that “national sins” must be remedied through legislative action rather than personal repentance. The best known Christian crusader for abolition, William Wilberforce, wrote in 1816 regarding his motivation for pursuing the cause,

I consider it my duty to endeavor to deliver these poor creatures from their present darkness and degradation not merely out of a direct regard for their well being . . . but also from a firm persuasion that both the colonists and we ourselves shall be otherwise the sufferers. The judicial and penal visitations of Providence occur commonly in the way of a natural consequence and it is in that way I should expect the evils to occur.⁶⁹

From Wilberforce’s perspective, Christian principles had to be converted into legislative policies so as to spare Britain the just punishments of providence. Christian doctrine motivated reformers who were no doubt concerned for the welfare of their fellow men and women but they were also concerned for their own salvation, and this hinged on national guilt or national purity. From this viewpoint, the sin of slavery, if not remedied, would result in providential punishment of the nation. In a historical era so focused on the possibility of the onset of the apocalypse, the convulsions and catastrophes described in the Revelation of St. John were easy to connect with the divine punishments that were sure to result from the pernicious enslavement of mankind.

The representation of slavery on large-scale canvases as in Roberts’s, Danby’s, and Martin’s work was a rarity in British visual culture prior to the “Abolition of Slavery Act” of 1833.⁷⁰ The iconic representation of the subject from the modern period, Turner’s *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying*, was not painted until

⁶⁹ “Wilberforce to Bathurst,” in *Historical Manuscript Commission Report on the Manuscripts of Earl Bathurst* (4 July 1816), 418.

⁷⁰ Hugh Honour, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the American Revolution to World War I*, 4 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 4:1:150. Honour quotes an article from 1840 wherein the author remarked on how few English painters have chosen to paint the subject of slavery, and Honour asserts that fact can be attributed to the system of private patronage and how “few collectors wished to have on their walls pictures of cruelty and suffering unrelieved.”

1840, seven years after the abolition of slavery and more than thirty years after the abolition of the slave trade (Figure 5.16). The late 1830s saw a rise in slave imagery in Britain, especially in relation to the Greek wars for independence by artists such as Charles Eastlake and George Hayter. There were also a few instances of artists representing the ancient Israelites as slaves, such as a print by the German artist Bendemann, whose painting of the enslaved Israelites was reproduced in British illustrated bibles by mid-century (Figure 5.17). Yet representing slaves from any period was undoubtedly more controversial before the Abolition Act of 1833 than after it. In the 1820s artists occupied a tenuous position with respect to engaging in political debates due to the tension surrounding politics at large. Government sponsored violence aimed at radical sympathizers had been swift and harsh during the Peterloo massacre in 1819 and the execution of the Cato Street conspirators in 1820, and following these two key events radicalism went underground in Britain.⁷¹ In such a tense political climate, speaking out against the government on the issue of slavery was a dangerous proposition—especially for artists who relied on wealthy patrons, many of whose livelihood hinged on slavery. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Historian Susan Juster has noted the necessity of religious prophets to use covert language to communicate regarding political issues in such a precarious context. The same principle could certainly be applied to artists who saw themselves as visionaries. Artists who wanted to engage political issues such as slavery, but also sought to insulate themselves from political and economic backlash could allude to political issues by employing religious narratives.

⁷¹ English Historian Michael Scrivener notes that the writings of the Spenceans, the most influential radical group from 1816-1820 and one which actively used religious writings to back their ideas, disappear almost entirely after the execution of the Cato St. Conspirators because it became risky for anyone to be identified in any way with the Spenceans. Michael Henry Scrivener, *Seditious Allegories: John Thelwall & Jacobin Writing* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 145.

Roberts seems to have had abolitionist sympathies. When traveling through North Africa and the Middle East in 1838, he recorded his abhorrence at the sight of slave markets in operation there, writing that “it was an altogether sickening sight, and I left it proud that I belonged to a nation who had abolished slavery.”⁷² Yet regardless of his personal political opinions, the representation of an enslaved population being freed in *The Departure of the Israelites from Egypt* would have carried political overtones in such a heated political climate. In an era where religion propelled abolitionism and the enslaved Israelites were seen as prototypes of modern African slaves, Roberts’s *The Departure of the Israelites* would have appealed to the same sympathies that ultimately resulted in the Abolition act of 1833. By engaging the discourse on slavery, Roberts’s work also alluded to a number of other political issues that used the rhetoric of slavery as a means of justifying Christian legislative action.

The debate over slavery set a precedent for other Christian-inspired political movements. In contrast to those who believed Christianity to be a fundamentally private matter that should not cross into the political realm, the legislative intervention into the economics of slavery set a precedent whereby Christian morality could justifiably be turned into law. In 1817 John Ovington wrote against “any kind of policy that would fetter the conscience” on the basis of Christian morality, and described the fight to end slavery as the proverbial “tip of the iceberg.” He wrote, “the Slave Trade, that odious traffic in the flesh and blood of human beings, was abolished by a steady union of talents, wealth, and influence. Precisely in the same way should we assail all the remains of

⁷² Letter of September 24, 1838, quoted in David Roberts and James Ballantine, *The Life of David Roberts, R. A* (Edinburgh: A. and C. Black, 1866), 81.

barbarism, which are yet to be found in our laws and institutions.”⁷³ The debate over slavery near the turn of the nineteenth century had fundamentally altered the relationship between Christianity and politics in Britain: rather than religion acting as a bulwark against changes to a traditional social structure, religion began to inspire progressive political movements. Instead of clinging to the institutions of the past, Christianity was used as a weapon against the past and the “remains of barbarism which are yet to be found in our laws and institutions.” By the 1820s the rhetoric of abolition was defined in even broader terms by early Christian Socialists.

Abolitionism and the Rise of Christian Socialism

“Christian Socialism” did not become a cohesive political movement until the middle of the nineteenth century, but scholars agree that its roots lay in the early decades of the century. As abolitionists, reformers, and non-conformists began to recognize the political power of Christianity, a coherent ideology began to be spelled out. Christ was described in clear political terms as a “great Reformer.”⁷⁴ Radical journals often placed quotations from the Bible below their mastheads as a means of infusing their discourse with religious principles.⁷⁵ At the core of Christian Socialism was the belief that oppression in any form was contrary to Christianity. Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote that Jesus “commanded his disciples to preserve a strict equality” because “universal equality

⁷³ John Ovington, *The Labouring Man's Advocate: An Appeal to the Justice and Humanity of the British Public Respecting the Wages of Labour* (Clapham Common: J. Ovington, 1817), xxvi-ii.

⁷⁴ R. Carlile, “To Mr. Henry Huny, Ilchester Gaol,” *The Republican* 5, no. 15 (1822): 453. This statement is not made by Carlile, but quoted in the letter.

⁷⁵ For instance, the working class journal *The Pioneer* carried the masthead, “The Day of our redemption Draweth Nigh,” drawn from Luke 21:28.

is the object of the Messiah's mission."⁷⁶ This juxtaposition of oppression and equality was the basis for virtually all Christian socialist thought. As the early Christian socialist John Ovington wrote, "It was oppression that brought such terrible calamities upon Egypt."⁷⁷ The representation of the exodus narrative by artists such as Roberts, Danby, and Martin, alluded simultaneously to the specific discourse on slavery and the general notion of oppression that would culminate in the ultimate demise of a society. In the eyes of Christian reformers, African slavery in the new world was abhorrent, but so were other forms of oppression that mirrored it and tended to undermine the notion of equality that was "the object of the Messiah's mission."

The term "wage-slave" was coined during these decades as a way of extending Christian abolitionist rhetoric to the fight against forms of domestic oppression, in particular, that being experienced by the laboring classes in Britain. In the years after Waterloo, radical journals such as *The People* asserted that "[the working classes in Britain] are enslaved—legally . . . forestalled by our good parliament."⁷⁸ In the same year Thomas Evans, the Spencean radical, wrote in his popular *Christian Policy* that the policies of land enclosure and high taxation have reduced the majority of Britons "to a pauper, a slave. A Slave! Aye, more a slave than the poor African in the plantation; the Africans master is bound to feed him, though he be unemployed, but the lawmaking landlords after robbing the poor of their all, wish to bind themselves to nothing."⁷⁹ This

⁷⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Lewis Patton, and Peter Mann, eds., *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion*, Bollingen Series Lxv (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1971), 218.

⁷⁷ John Ovington, *The Sin and Danger of Oppressing the Poor: Selected from the Scriptures for the Benefit of All Classes of Society* (London: Pewtress, Low, and Pewtress, 1819), xv.

⁷⁸ *The People* XII (1817): 348.

⁷⁹ Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy*, 17.

idea was canonized in 1830 when the Tory Richard Oastler published his famous letter in the *Leeds Mercury* entitled “Yorkshire Slavery.” Oastler wrote that,

thousands of our fellow creatures... are at this very moment existing in a state of slavery, more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system ‘colonial slavery.’ These innocent creatures drawl out, unpitied, their short but miserable existence, in a place famed for its profession of religious zeal . . . the very streets which receive the droppings of an ‘Anti-Slavery Society’ are every morning wet by the tears of innocent victims at the accursed shrine of avarice, who are compelled (not by the cart whip of the Negro slave driver) but the dread of the equally appalling thong or strap of the overlooker . . . poor infants! Ye are indeed sacrificed at the shrine of avarice, without even the solace of the Negro slave... he knows it is his sordid, mercenary Master’s interests that he should live, be strong and healthy. Not so with you. Ye are doomed to labor from morning to night for one who cares and not how soon your weak and tender frames are stretched to breaking! . . . when your joints can act no longer, your emaciated frames are cast aside, the boards on which you lately toiled and wasted life away, are instantly supplied with other victims, who in this boasted land of liberty are HIRED -- not sold-- as slaves and daily forced to hear that they are free.⁸⁰

Oastler’s letter pointed out the flaws in opposing slavery on religious grounds and of ignoring the horrific abuses at home—abuses that often exceeded those in a slave-based system of labor because of misconstrued incentives. As he noted, slave owners had property to lose if they were excessively abusive to their slaves but the factory owner did not run the same risks since he had access to a seemingly endless supply of needy children. This emphasis on improper incentives and severe abuses in the British factory system allowed Christian reformers to broaden the debate on abolition. The legislative achievements of the abolitionist movement set a precedent for Christian socialist reformers who continued to attack the injustices of the system throughout the century.

To summarize, the political potency of Roberts’s *Departure of the Israelites* stemmed from its engagement with a number of issues that were collectively bound to the idea of slavery—a concept referenced in the painting. Slavery was the political cause

⁸⁰ Richard Oastler, “Yorkshire Slavery,” *Leeds Mercury*, 16 October 1830; The letter is also published in full in Cecil Driver, *Tory Radical: The Life of Richard Oastler* (New York: OUP, 1946).

that prompted many Christians to see their religion through a new political lens which aimed to improve the world pro-actively rather than protecting it from descent into godless liberalism. The success of the abolitionist movement established an effective pattern whereby Christian-based reforms might likewise achieve legislative success. Finally, Christian socialists broadened the issue of slavery in Britain to include wage-slaves in Britain, and a whole new set of legislative aims was consequently based around rhetorical references to slavery. When Roberts exhibited his painting in 1829, the picturing of the abolition of an enslaved people in a biblical context could have resonated with the campaigns to free African slaves in the new world and alleviate domestic wage-slavery at home.

The Government of God under Moses

Because Roberts's painting dealt with the idea of slavery within the exodus narrative, and this was a biblical precedent much exploited by Christian socialists, exploring how these reformers blended their calls for ending wage-slavery with the Mosaic account from the Bible will shed light on the possible meanings produced by this painting. Christian socialist reforms took many legislative shapes, each of which could have been alluded to generically through the representation of freeing the Israelites from bondage since the bondage of British factory workers was portrayed as physical and economic oppression. Christian reformers had successfully lobbied for restraints on child labor in 1819, including age and hour limitations in factories.⁸¹ They also argued for a more progressive structure of taxation, the institution of usury laws, minimum wage

⁸¹ R. A. Soloway, *Prelates and People: Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England, 1783-1852* (London: R. Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 12.

laws, and other legislative checks against the exploitation of the working classes.⁸² In essence, Christian reformers were attempting to create an earthly government that mirrored their conception of a heavenly government. Politically laden phrases such as “the moral Governor” and “the great Governor” were commonly employed in reference to God’s role in the administration of the universe.⁸³ The challenge was how to translate the theoretical governance of the universe into the realities of British politics. The radical journal *The Republican*, which often contained anti-religious rhetoric, printed a long article in 1825 entitled “Sacred Politics” that aimed to examine the bible and ascertain the type of government it favored. After examining both the Old and New Testaments, the author came to the conclusion that

The sacred writings give the fullest and most satisfactory account of the moral government of God, which is a government of justice and benevolence; they hold it up to our view, and propose it to our imitation; so that the scriptures are most decidedly in favour of that government which is most like God’s . . . the New testament inclines strongly in favor of that government, whatever may be its name and form, in which the poor are taken from the background of forgetfulness and contempt, and brought forward to be held up to view as important and respectable; where virtues, not riches, place the laurel on the brow. And that government which casts contempt upon the poor, and neglects the virtuous, has the greatest reason to dread being tried by the touchstone of revelation.⁸⁴

This passage is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the rhetoric of the apocalypse was specifically employed, even in an anti-religious journal like *The Republican*. The final phrase, condemning a government that neglects the poor as having “the greatest reason to dread being tried by the touchstone of revelation,” directly referenced an

⁸² Ovington, *The Sin and Danger of Oppressing the Poor: Selected from the Scriptures for the Benefit of All Classes of Society*, 58, 74; Charles Hall, *The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States* (London: Printed for the author, 1805); William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday, and Congress of the Productive Classes* (pp. 15. The Author: London, 1832).

⁸³ “Art. VIII - the Siege of Jerusalem: A Poem by Charles Peers, Esq.,” *The British Review, and London Critical Journal* 21, no. 42 (1823): 165; “Art. IV 1. Idolatry: A Poem in Four Parts,” *The Eclectic Review* 27 (1827): 440.

⁸⁴ “Sacred Politics,” *The Republican* 11, no. 5 (1825): 148.

impending apocalyptic judgment that was believed to befall the wicked. Second, the passage is striking for its vague generalities when describing the government of God; the author used generic phrases such as “whatever may be its name and form” rather than naming a specific republican or democratic system. I chose this passage because in some ways it encapsulated the challenge of how to outline the government of God. So many different systems of government were recorded in the Bible there are that it could be difficult to draw firm conclusions as to which type of earthly government God preferred. Christian reformers were left with a series of basic principles centered on the protection of the poor but with very few concrete policies or detailed government models.

The only section in the bible that departed from this standard was the government instituted by Moses for the Israelites. Reformers recognized and proclaimed that on this occasion, in the bible, God directed the institution of a government system and thereby provided a precise pattern to follow. The writer for *The Republican* concluded that despite the many things relating to civil government in the bible, “the chief part [in the bible on civil government] is contained . . . in the dispensation of the religion which God gave to the Jews,” because in it God “not only laid some restraints upon the civil administration, but absolutely appointed of what kind the government should be.”⁸⁵ The author further noted that “the Mosaic constitution” was difficult to identify by name, but it was in any case not an aristocracy or a monarchy determined by birth or wealth. He asserted, “We may call it a Federal Republic . . . We are constrained to acknowledge the democratic nature of the constitution which God framed for the Jews . . . the strain of the Old Testament runs in favor of democracy.”⁸⁶ This categorization of the Mosaic system

⁸⁵ Ibid.: 133-7.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

of government as a democratic Federal Republic meant that the depiction of Moses and the Israelites was by nature politicized. While the subjects of the exodus depicted by Roberts and Martin were certainly politicized, the final painting under consideration, Francis Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, encouraged a political reading by alluding even more specifically than the others to the government of God as revealed by Moses.

Francis Danby's *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* in Context

Thus far, I have argued that Martin's painting elevated the figure of Moses as the political leader of the Israelites and that Roberts pictured Israel in the guise of a modern nation. Francis Danby represented the culminating episode of the exodus narrative by painting the Red Sea crossing (Figure 5.5). From the moment Danby exhibited *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* (1825) critics noted its similarity to the work of Martin, yet this was no mere plagiarism. Danby was more adept at painting the human figure than Martin or Roberts, and his work features a number of detailed foreground figures. They add a dimension of individual emotion lacking in Martin's and Roberts's paintings, and this adds a new dimension of signification to the work. Danby integrated a number of details into the scene that depart from the biblical text and only make sense within the larger framework of Israelite history. The combined effect of these features was the depiction of a single narrative moment that also referred to the future Israelite government under the leadership of Moses.

Francis Danby emigrated from Ireland in 1813 with a small group of artists, all intent on becoming successful painters in London. He spent much of his first decade in

England in Bristol trying to make ends meet, but things changed dramatically in 1823 after one of his paintings was admitted into the Royal Academy exhibition and later purchased by its President, Sir Thomas Lawrence. On the heels of this success, Danby attempted to create a much more dramatic painting that would capture the attention of all London. When he exhibited *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* in 1825, it was highly praised and sold for the substantial sum of 500 guineas. One reviewer called it “the grand attraction at Somerset House” that year.⁸⁷ Danby was elected the following year as an Associate of the Royal Academy. A large mezzotint of the painting was made in 1829, when one reviewer referred to it as “universally known and appreciated.”⁸⁸

Danby based his painting on the text of Exodus chapter fourteen. Following Pharaoh’s release of the Israelites, they were lead away from Egypt by the Lord, who manifested himself “by day in a pillar of cloud . . . and by night in a pillar of fire.”⁸⁹ Soon after their departure, Pharaoh reversed his original decision and gathered his armies to pursue and re-enslave the Israelites. As they were trapped on the one side by the Red Sea and on the other by Pharaoh’s armies, God instructed Moses to part the Red Sea and the Israelites walked on dry ground to the other side. Pharaoh’s armies pursued, but in an act of ultimate punishment, the Lord instructed Moses to lift his rod and close the Red Sea upon them.⁹⁰

Danby chose the dramatic moment when Moses commanded the Sea to close on Pharaoh’s armies. The composition positions the viewer on a raised bluff along with the Israelites who look back at the spectacle of the waters crashing in upon the Egyptians.

⁸⁷ “Monthly View of the New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Sceinttific Intelligence,” *Belle Assemblée; or Court and fashionable magazine* 9, no. 54 (1829): 288.

⁸⁸ “Fine Arts Exhibitions,” *Monthly Magazine, or British Register* 7, no. 41 (1829): 550.

⁸⁹ Exodus 13:21

⁹⁰ Exodus 14:4-31

Most of the Israelites gaze out toward the Red Sea and have their backs turned on the viewer. The painting integrates the spectator into the scene by placing him or her alongside the Israelites, and by so doing causes the viewer to identify with the Israelites. Danby divided the canvas nearly in half with a dark rocky precipice that stretches upward and outward above the banks of the Red Sea (Figure 5.18). The small and relatively inconspicuous figure of Moses is positioned on a smaller outcropping in the middle ground, and his figure would be virtually invisible were it not for the contrast between the dark shadows produced by the rocky peak behind him and his white robes (Figure 5.19). Waters rush on the left hand side of this bisecting precipice, caving in toward the Israelites and the viewer. Remnants of Pharaoh's grand army can be detected in the gushing white waters that have conquered this intimidating force (Figure 5.20). Danby represents the "countless multitudes of Israel" at the base of the white water and overflowing into the foreground.⁹¹ These masses then pour over to the right and gather around the pillar of fire hovering in the air over the Ark of the Covenant (Figure 5.21). In the foreground Danby painted a number of highly detailed figures, many of whom are overcome with emotion, yet a number of others appear engaged in various activities. Some are carrying and piling up goods, others are praising God, and some are cowering in fear (Figure 5.22). Miriam, the sister of Moses, sits prominently on a bright red carpet located in the right foreground of the canvas. In the far distance the great pyramids of Egypt are silhouetted against an ominously red sunset. As with works by Martin, Danby's painting was popular with audiences in London because of its monumental scale, minute figures, familiar biblical narrative, and the sheer drama of the subject.

⁹¹ "Monthly View of the New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence," 288.

The Equitable Economics of Moses and British Reformist Politics

As mentioned previously, Moses was a heavily politicized figure in the early nineteenth century and many people would have viewed the representation of this exodus subject through a political lens. It was not simply Moses's position as the leader of a revolution, but more specifically the social policies he instituted at the behest of God, and their connection to the goals of nineteenth century social reformers, that made him politically relevant at the time. Danby's painting contained various elements that allowed it to allude to the government instituted by Moses. At the heart of that government was a radical mechanism for ensuring a more economically equitable society.

Because of the Israelite tendency to focus on earthly comforts and possessions, the Mosaic system of government contained a series of checks against property accumulation along with incentives designed to discourage pernicious social practices that preyed on the poor. Many reformers pointed to this model as the prototype Christian government that should be mirrored by modern Christian nations like Britain, largely because it was believed to have been established by God. Samuel Taylor Coleridge summed up the key elements of the Israelite system of government as follows:

The Jewish government was founded on an original Contract. The Constitution was presented to the whole nation by Moses, and each individual solemnly assented to it. By this Constitution the Jews became a Federal Republic . . . The country contained 15 millions of acres, which were equally divided among the people, 25 acres to each man . . . to preserve this equal division it became necessary to prevent alienation—to this end interest for money was forbidden and an act of grace for the abolition of all debts passed every sixth year . . . but as abuses might gradually creep in, and as all constitutions require to be frequently brought back to their first principles, on every 50th year a solemn Jubilee was appointed, in which all lands were restored, and the estate of every family discharged from all encumbrances returned to the family again . . . property is power and equal property equal power. A poor man is necessarily more or less a

slave. Poverty is the death of public freedom—it virtually enslaves individuals, and generates those vices, which makes necessary a dangerous concentration of power in the executive branch. If we except the Spartan, the Jewish has been the only republic that can consistently boast of liberty and equality.⁹²

Coleridge's statement is telling for a number of reasons. First, he employed the language of Republican politics. He spoke of the Jewish "Constitution," described their system as a "Federal Republic," and cited it as the historical emblem of "liberty and equality." The use of this type of language in the 1790s would have positioned the government of Moses as fundamentally radical since it so closely mirrored the calls of the most radical French revolutionaries for an economic foundation of equality. Second, he outlined the specific policies that made the Mosaic system successful, including equal distribution of land, democratic consent, a prohibition against charging interest on loans, and periodic abolition of debt. It is not difficult to conceive of how these ideas might appeal to large sectors of the British public, many of whom had recently lost their land due "enclosure" and were now struggling under the various debts incurred in the process of migration to urban areas. Virtually every level of abuse allowed in the British social economy was prohibited in the Mosaic Republic.

The economic system of Moses was an especially powerful prototype for reformers. It offered a supposed historical precedent of a successful legislative structure that achieved many of the goals reformers aimed to accomplish. It was also an example that carried the authoritative weight of the Bible. Finally, for believing Christians, it was a system considered to be designed by the hand of God. For these reasons, reformers cited the Mosaic government consistently in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

⁹² Coleridge, Patton, and Mann, eds., *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion*, 124-6.

Charles Hall, one of the most influential reformers and earliest Socialist thinkers,⁹³ posited the Mosaic system of government as the antidote to the evils allowed in Britain. In his seminal *The Effects of Civilization*, Hall wrote that “the great inequality of property” was the foremost evil of the age because even “good and able men” refused to recognize its “destructive” nature. Countering the most commonly cited argument against reform, impracticality of administering an economic system based on economic equity, he cited the Mosaic system and its economic policies. He then reviewed the long history of the Jews under the Mosaic system and called it more permanent “than any other system of polity that ever existed in any nation of the world.”⁹⁴ Hall believed that a progressive tax should be instituted, primogeniture should be done away with, and a punitive tax on luxury goods should be introduced; for each of these proposals he cited the Mosaic system of government as evidence of their feasibility, wisdom, and practicality.

Danby did not of course paint a series of social policies; he painted the deliverance of Israel out of Egypt and the closing of the Red Sea on the Egyptians. Connecting this specific biblical moment to the social and economic policies of the Mosaic system of government might seem unlikely. However, a detailed consideration of Danby’s painting points to motifs that emphasize the political authority of Moses and the conditions that prompted the institution of the social policies reformers were citing at the time.

⁹³See Charles Ryle Fay, *Life and Labour in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1920), 168; Mark Blaug, *Ricardian Economics: A Historical Study*, Yale Studies in Economics. No. 8 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 148.

⁹⁴ Hall, *The Effects of Civilization on the People in European States*, 216-18.; Hall’s book was re-published in 1813, 1820, and 1850. For details, see J. R. Dinwiddy, *Radicalism and Reform in Britain, 1780-1850* (London: Hambledon Press, 1992), 89.

The Anachronistic Ark

One of the oddest details included in Danby's painting is the Ark of the Covenant (Figure 5.23). Its inclusion in the scene is odd because the Ark of the Covenant did not exist yet at this point in the biblical narrative. One reviewer noted the anachronism: "The Ark of the Covenant appears in the distant van of the multitudinous line of the Israelites. This is an anachronism, for the Ark was not yet made."⁹⁵ The ark was not constructed until much later in the narrative, following Moses's receipt of the Ten Commandments.⁹⁶ Danby's inclusion of the ark does not reveal an indifference to anachronism, rather, it reveals his utilization of anachronism as a storytelling mechanism. Since artists were conventionally bound to represent a single moment in time, various strategies had been developed for conveying the broader scope of a narrative; one of these was the inclusion of objects that allude to portions of the story not actually represented. In this case, Danby seems to have combined elements from various narrative moments to convey the broader story of the Israelites under Moses.

The inclusion of the Ark of the Covenant was significant because it represented, as theologian John Owen put it in 1815, "the most eminent pledge of the especial presence of God among the people."⁹⁷ The ark was more than a spiritual marker, however; it was also a political one. The ark held "the law" or the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Moses was the "Hebrew Legislator" and the ark symbolized the divine origin of his political authority, as stemming from "the Great

⁹⁵ "Fine Arts," *Examiner*, May 15 1825, 305.

⁹⁶ Exodus 25: 10-22

⁹⁷ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews: With the Preliminary Exercitations*, Edward Williams, ed. (London: James Black, 1815), 218.

Governor” of the universe. The Ark was also used as a political symbol by early nineteenth century writers. Writing in 1816, one British author asserted, “the constitution is our Ark of the Covenant.”⁹⁸ By drawing parallels between the modern constitution and the Israelite Ark, writings like these re-inscribed the fundamentally political nature of the Ark of the Covenant. By anachronistically including the Ark in a scene of the Red Sea closing, Danby’s painting breaks free from the pictorial constraints of depicting a single narrative moment depicted, while simultaneously alluding to the political authority on which the Israelite nation was based.

The Ark of the Covenant is further highlighted in this painting as it resides beneath a glowing pillar of light (Figure 5.24). Because of the complexity of a scene such as this, certain details functioned as markers for guiding viewers to crucial details; one of these was the pillar of light that contrasts with the dark background on the right hand side of the canvas. Reviewers of the painting marveled at the way in which Danby painted this pillar of light that hovers above and points to the Ark. The critic for the *London Magazine and Review* was captivated with the pillar’s affect:

In colour, it is of a livid and ominous bluish green; a pervading hue of death and dismay; it seems the element where life dies and death lives, which only Dante or Milton could imagine, and only Danby has painted. It appears to emanate from that wondrous light where locally resides the author or agent of the miracle. In painting this pillar of fire, the artists appears to have dipped his pencil,—not in pigments, but in the essence of light itself. Instead of a column of fire, it takes the more extraordinary form of a lengthened parabolic spindle of light . . . the ominous light which we have endeavored to describe, gleams on the countless multitudes of Israel, which seems to consist of ‘numbers without number.’⁹⁹

The pillar of fire interested this critic as a symbolic form and also guided his eye to the minute “multitudes of Israel” on the right-hand side of the canvas and the object they

⁹⁸ “Art Xi,” *The Quarterly Review* XVI, no. XXXI (1816): 253.

⁹⁹ “The Fine Arts,” *London Magazine and Review* 2 (1825): 256.

gather around. As another critic pointed out, “The effect produced by the pillar of fire, in illuminating the ark, is wonderfully illusive.”¹⁰⁰ The ark is a tiny component in a large painting, nevertheless it gains visual prominence because the pillar of light compels viewers to seek out what lies beneath its glow.

Emotional Dissonance and Israelite Greed

The Ark of the Covenant signified Moses’s political authority and alluded to the future of the Israelites under Moses’s leadership, though, it did not speak by itself to any specific aspect of the Mosaic government. However, other elements of Danby’s painting pointed more specifically to the social reforms that concerned nineteenth century reformers. Many parts of the Mosaic government were aimed at countering the Israelite tendency to forget or ignore God’s intervention on their behalf. Despite their miraculous delivery through the Red Sea, they foolishly built the golden calf; despite manna falling from heaven, they longed for the comforts of Egypt. Though the biblical record does not record this tendency occurring at the moment of their deliverance through the Red Sea, Danby again deviated from the biblical text by integrating an allusion to this later moment of the story in the form of the emotional dissonance among the foreground figures. Rather than creating a homogenous group to response to the Red Sea closing on the Egyptians among the Israelites, Danby explored a spectrum of responses that ranged from total indifference to overflowing gratitude. The variance in emotional responses helped connect this narrative moment with the future travails of the Israelites in the wilderness. And by so doing, Danby’s painting indirectly alluded to the social and

¹⁰⁰ “Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence,” 261.

economic policies that were designed to counteract the type of Israelite ingratitude, selfishness, and greed that he depicted.

The aspects of *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* that attracted the attention of critics, and presumably audiences as well, were Danby's divergences from the well-known formula of John Martin. The most obvious difference was degree of attention Danby devoted to the human figure. Martin was frequently criticized for his inability to paint the human figure; for the most part, he avoided doing so on a scale that would expose his weakness. When he did paint larger figures, such as Moses in *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, he tended to obscure them, for example by turning Moses away from the viewer. Even though Danby was trained as a landscape painter, he was more adept at figural painting and he differentiated himself from Martin in this respect. One reviewer noted that in contrast to Martin, Danby was superior "in the arrangement of the design, so as to diversify the subject by just gradations, and make every portion contribute to the unity of effect, Mr. Danby seems superior to his eminent rival. In the management of the details also, he is more judicious, accurate, and elegant."¹⁰¹ Phrases like "management of the details" and "diversify the subject" were polite ways of referencing Martin's well-known inability to deal with human figures. In a preparatory sketch for *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, Danby conceived of a composition more like Martin's (Figure 5.25). The sketch shows Moses as a lone figure in the foreground, his back turned to the viewer, much like Martin's Moses in *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (Figure 5.2). These comparisons indicate that the decision to paint large foreground figures was a significant one by Danby, and was not lost on critics, spectators, or other artists at the time.

¹⁰¹ "The Passage of the Red Sea," *Athenaeum and Literary Chronicle* 72 (1829): 152.

The range of actions and the emotions evinced by Danby's figures at the sight of the Red Sea closing also elevated their significance. One critic said he was struck by these "various painted episodes, which show the different effects of the miracle wrought in their favour on the various ages and temperaments of the children of Israel."¹⁰² Representing such an array of "ages" and "temperaments" among the children of Israel was not without precedent. For instance, in Nicholas Poussin's *The Jews Gathering of the Manna in the Desert* the range of emotions and reactions among the Israelites allowed the artist to simultaneously heighten the drama of the narrative and demonstrate his artistic virtuosity (Figure 5.26). The same could undoubtedly be said of Danby's painting. Yet that is not to suggest that the figures and their varied emotional responses ceased to affect the production of meaning. Danby created tension between figures who exhibit amazement and gratitude to God for their deliverance and those who are otherwise distracted. The figures that kneel in prayer, raise their hands towards the heavens, and prostrate themselves seem to demonstrate the appropriate response to miraculous deliverance, and were they not juxtaposed with figures reacting differently they might not stand out as significant. But interspersed throughout the foreground are a series of figures that appear distracted, either by their own pity or by the objects they have brought with them, to the point of being unaware of the intervention of God on their behalf.

For example, Danby presents two figures that tend to inversely mirror one another on the left hand side of the canvas. Near the center of the foreground, one of the most prominent figures is a man dressed in a blue robe kneeling on the ground. The man is faced toward the Red Sea and he clasps his hands together and looks upward to God in an

¹⁰² "The Fine Arts," 256.

act of praise (Figure 5.27). This figure is mirrored by another figure in blue garb on the far left edge of the canvas, yet this figure is turned away from the red sea and sits with his head buried in his hands (Figure 5.28). This figure's emotional distance from the scene is heightened by the fact that right over his shoulder a number of Israelites raise their hands in gratitude for their deliverance. The dramatic curve of the crashing waves and the subtle curve of the foreground platform visually links these two figures and creates a dialogue between their responses.

This same emotional juxtaposition is repeated and magnified near the center foreground of the canvas. Here, Danby contrasts two women carrying infants in their arms (Figure 5.29). The one woman has collapsed on the ground, her head buried in her arms, her infant lying beneath her. The other woman, who is positioned only a few feet away, exhibits perhaps the most joyous response of any figure in the scene. While kneeling on the rocky ground and staring out toward the Red Sea, she cradles her baby against her left shoulder and raises her right arm in a gesture of exultation and reverence. Despite the arduous journey recently undertaken by each woman, one wallows in her misery while the other exults and praises the mercy of God. These repeated motifs create a tension between those who acknowledge and revere the miraculous intervention of God and those so preoccupied with their own misery that they become indifferent to the dramatic scene before them. By employing color, line, compositional placement, gesture, and repetition, Danby's work suggests the duality and fluidity of Israelite faith. These variable responses are crucial because they allude to the future struggles of the Israelites under Moses and the subsequent policies of the Mosaic system of government.

The Flesh-Pots of Egypt

The Israelites tended to forget God during the journey through the wilderness described in the book of Exodus, worse, they frequently longed for the comforts they had experienced while slaves in Egypt. On multiple occasions God miraculously intervened to provide for their physical needs. For instance, when there was a lack of water, Moses struck a rock and water came out; when there was no food, the Lord sent manna from heaven. However, despite their needs being met, they frequently longed for the material comforts of Egypt. One of the most oft quoted passages from Exodus is,

And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: And the children of Israel said unto them, Would to God we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full.¹⁰³

The term “flesh-pots” was common parlance in the 1820s in religious and non-religious settings and is significant in relation to Danby’s painting. While some interpreted the phrase literally as a reference to the food the Israelites ate in Egypt, more often it was used metaphorically in reference to the enticements, comforts, and luxuries of the world. In 1817, one author who was attempting to stamp out revolutionary sentiment made connections between the British and the “Rebellious Israelites” by writing, “But you, Briton, my countrymen, are invited to rebel and cry out for the flesh-pots which your fathers had not,—for the comforts they never enjoyed.”¹⁰⁴ The Israelite desire for the “flesh-pots” of Egypt was equated with the desire among nineteenth-century Britons who were discontent with having their needs met and wanted more of everything. As with Martin’s Mesopotamian Trilogy, this concept fed into the debate on luxury and its

¹⁰³ Exodus 16:2-3

¹⁰⁴ “To the People of England,” *The Good Old Times! A New light for the People of England*, no. 18 (1817): 176.

deleterious effects on society mentioned in the previous Chapter. The term “flesh-pots” assumes significance in relation to Danby’s painting because the foreground corners are piled with the enticing “flesh-pots” of Egypt.

One of the most unexpected and eye-catching motifs in the scene is a large mound of luxury objects painted in the lower left corner. The pile has been created by an individual who continues to carry objects as the Red Sea closes behind him (Figure 5.30). The figure’s actions runs counter to the drama of the scene; instead of turning and acknowledging the convulsing waters, so dramatically painted that they seem to have an audible affect on the viewer, this figure stares down at a large golden vase on a fine red carpet. Due to his labors a mound of shining armor, jeweled cups, golden helmets, and numerous other luxury objects takes up the entire left corner of the foreground. One reviewer concluded that these must have been “the riches of which Egypt has been despoiled, consisting of splendid armor, magnificent vases, and other costly matters,” since the Israelites as newly freed slaves would not have possessed such objects themselves.¹⁰⁵

This motif of distraction by luxury goods during the moment of miraculous deliverance is repeated across the canvas. Another mound of objects is located in the lower right corner, along with a group of oblivious individuals who unload a camel laden with goods. In addition, Danby placed a series of figures in the middle ground that push a cumbersome golden chariot loaded with goods up the hill (Figure 5.31). The episodes gain significance because, as with the inclusion of the Ark of the Covenant, they represent significant departures from the biblical text. Their conspicuous inclusion requires us to question why Danby would have painted such scenes. I would argue that

¹⁰⁵ “The Fine Arts.”

these episodes can be understood as evoking the “flesh-pots” of Egypt. Danby represents the Israelites *literally* clinging to the fine things of Egypt even as they leave them behind. The still lifes in the foreground, and the figures engrossed in them, point to a broader moral in the story of the exodus regarding greed and selfishness among the Israelites, even when confronted with the evidence of God’s power and presence.

Danby’s emphasized the metaphorical function of these foreground objects by having them reflect the light from the pillar of fire above the Ark of the Covenant. A reviewer of the engraving made after Danby’s painting noted that

the splendid vases and other valuables of which [the Israelites] had despoiled the Egyptians, are seen displayed in the immediate foreground, sparkling with the light thrown from the pillar of fire, which rises majestically on the right hand distance, and flings its awful glare upon the multitude.¹⁰⁶

Danby visually tied the compositional elements of the painting together by having the vases and armor reflect the intense light of the pillar, and these connections were symbolically potent. They highlight the contrast between the Ark of the Covenant representing the literal presence of God and the Israelite obsession with earthly matters: piles of luxury goods are transformed into the “flesh-pots” of Egypt by the heavenly glow which shines off their surfaces.

The juxtaposition of groups of figures fixated on luxury objects and figures sorrowing at the moment of their deliverance allowed Danby’s work to transcend the single narrative moment represented and allude to the moral lessons conveyed in the Israelite story. When story of the parting of the Red Sea was cited from the pulpit, more often than not the sermon also referenced the plagues from Egypt, the subsequent wandering in the desert for forty years, and the ultimate settlement of the Israelites in

¹⁰⁶ “Engravings,” *Examiner*, March 29 1829, 200.

Canaan. By incorporating episodes that refer to later moments in the biblical narrative into the main subject of the Red Sea crossing, Danby's painting in a sense emulates the structure of sermons that elaborated on a theme by referring to future episodes.

Danby represented the Israelites as torn between fundamental impulses: gratitude and greed, faith and doubt, selflessness and selfishness. Even when witnessing the miraculous hand of God before their eyes, those impulses persisted. This point is crucial in reference to contemporary British politics in the nineteenth century. Those arguing for government reformation often based their arguments on the notion that mankind was inclined toward oppressing one another and government intervention was required in order to stabilize and harmonize society. The *laissez faire* approach preferred by conservatives was based on the notion of self-correction; the ability of religion to provide that self-correction freed government from any responsibility toward that ends. Yet Moses was a religious leader who felt compelled to institute social and economic policies to counter mankind's inherent tendencies rather than placing his faith in the power of religion alone to produce social harmony. Thus, by depicting the selfish and greedy tendencies of man when confronted with his miraculous deliverance, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* makes an implicit case for the government policies Moses instituted and that reformers cited as templates for modern Britain.

The Economics of Moses as the Foundation for Spencean Reform

As mentioned in the previous chapter one of the most influential reformist groups of the early nineteenth century were the biblically-inspired Spenceans Philanthropists. Spence's political program was based on the Biblical account of the Mosaic system of

government and a subsequent re-imagining of the “state of nature” debate. Ever since Hobbes in the seventeenth century had spoken of a “state of nature,” political philosophers had wrestled with what that “state” looked like. Thinkers like Locke and Rousseau characterized the state of nature of as a type of imagined Arcadian society without government; Spence also spoke of a “state of nature” but his conception was not of the type envisioned by Hobbes or Rousseau, chiefly because he antithetically described government as being central to its maintenance. For Spence, the “state of nature” was “any condition in which the natural right of property [was] upheld and guaranteed.”¹⁰⁷ Rather than existing entirely in theory as with Locke or Rousseau, Spence’s “state of nature” was premised on the account of Moses and the government he was supposedly inspired by God to institute. According to Spence, the “state of nature” was divinely ordained, yet it was also contingent upon social institutions for its maintenance; it depended on the exertion of human agency. Coleridge echoed this sentiment when he cited Moses’s pronouncement of God’s will contained in the Bible that “the Land shall not be sold, for the Land is mine, saith the Lord, and yea are strangers and sojourners with me” as evidence for his position that “there is nothing more pernicious than the notion than any one possesses an absolute right to the soil, which he appropriates.”¹⁰⁸ Coleridge and Spence both cited the Mosaic system of government as a model for the type of legislative incursion that would enable the state of nature to be maintained.

This concept related to Danby’s painting both because Spence’s “state of nature” was premised on the Mosaic system and also because the justification for instituting such

¹⁰⁷ Malcolm Chase, *'the People's Farm': English Radical Agrarianism 1775-1840* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 56.

¹⁰⁸ Coleridge, Patton, and Mann, eds., *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion*, 127.

a system hinged on the belief that people would inherently act selfishly, ungratefully, and greedily, just as Danby portrayed them. Yet to fully understand the possible political relevance of Danby's painting it is necessary to look beyond the "state of nature" argument made by Spence and consider the degree to which elements of the Mosaic system became touchstones for reform after Spence.

Spencean thought inspired a generation of reformers, who continued to cite the Mosaic government as a model to follow. Spence's successor Thomas Evans emphasized the Mosaic dimension of the ideology in his *Christian Policy* (1816), writing that

from the date . . . when Moses established his agrarian republic, to this hour the struggle of despotism has never ceased in endeavoring to reduce mankind again to universal slavery . . . the divine laws promulgated through the interposition of Moses, command the establishment of an agrarian commonwealth, a republic.¹⁰⁹

During the 1820s the rhetorical employment of the Mosaic government as a precedent for parliamentary reform was continued in publications like *The Imperial Magazine* which featured an article "On the Legislation of Moses" in 1823. The article stated that under the Mosaic system, "the restraining laws on usury, and against every kind of oppression, convincingly teach the humanity of the legislator; and certainly afford a profitable warning to every state, against the growing and overpowering evils of national pauperism."¹¹⁰ As the debate regarding the reformation of the poor laws became even more heated in the early 1830s, the working class journal *The Co-operator* again cited the Mosaic system of government as a pattern to be followed, stating that "the avarice and rapacity of the rich of those days [meaning the days of the Israelites under Moses], and the natural tendency to accumulate, were guarded against by a law which prevented the

¹⁰⁹ Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy*, 8.

¹¹⁰ T. Yates, "On the Legislation of Moses," *Imperial Magazine* 5, no. 53 (1823): 403.

perpetual alienation of small properties.” But under the government of Moses, “Neither force nor cunning could despoil a man of his little inheritance.”¹¹¹ The Spencean Allen Davenport put it succinctly in 1836: “the only question to be decided is which is right, the Bible, or the landlord’s title-deeds.”¹¹²

Moses, The Jubilee Trumpet, and Land Reform

Thomas Spence brought land reform to the forefront and again used the writings of Moses as the primary evidence in making the argument for a radical re-distribution of land premised on the Mosaic practice of the Jubilee which was designed to guarantee universal access to land and relative economic equality. The Jubilee comes from Leviticus Chapter 35 where the economic laws of Moses are explained. The bible states, “And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof: it shall be a jubilee unto you; and ye shall return every man unto his possession, and ye shall return every man unto his family.”¹¹³ During the Jubilee land was not to be tilled and whatever was produced belonged to the poor. All debts previously incurred were forgiven and both hired and bond servants were set free. Finally, land ownership was re-aligned and families were restored to their original inheritances. In his seminal work *The Rights of Man*, Thomas Spence presented God as a “notorious leveler” and invoked the Levitical text in relation to the Jubilee, writing that God “certainly meant to stir up the people every fiftieth year, to inflict upon liberty and equality, or the re-possession of their just rights, whether their masters or creditors were

¹¹¹ “The Bible,” 3.

¹¹² Allen Davenport, *The Life, Writings and Principles of Thomas Spence, Author of the Spencean System, or Agrarian Equality ... With a Portrait of the Author* (London: Wakelin, 1836), 11.

¹¹³ Leviticus 35:10

agreeable or not.”¹¹⁴ Spence’s employment of the word “inflict” emphasizes the need for legislative intervention to constrain mankind so that “liberty and equality” might reign over man’s tendencies to oppress and acquire, such as those represented in Danby’s painting. The “agreeableness” of mankind is irrelevant, according to Spence, when the results are either liberty or enslavement.

The concept of the Jubilee gained significant currency in early nineteenth century Britain due to its salient relation to the specific problems facing the laboring classes and its ability to connect with a religious public. From 1801 to 1831, 3,511,770 acres of common land across was taken from the peasantry and designated as private property by the English aristocracy under acts of “enclosure.”¹¹⁵ Peasants who had formerly relied upon the common lands for their survival were forced to attempt to find wage work on large farms or in factories. Either option presented bleak prospects due to the glut of available labor following enclosure. Because of this, land reformation or land re-distribution became a central component in the reformist platform.

The discourse on the Jubilee was so pervasive in the early nineteenth century that the representation of Moses and the Israelites would have invariably recalled it in the minds of many spectators. Mention of the political viability of the Jubilee began in the eighteenth century by writers such as the non-conformist minister Moses Lowman and Aberdeen University professor William Ogilvie, who proposed that a Jubilee be established with regard to property in mirror of the Levitical Jubilee.¹¹⁶ During the

¹¹⁴ Thomas Spence, *The Rights of Man* (London: Printed for the Author, 1793), 22-3.

¹¹⁵ Linebaugh, “Jubilating; or, How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee against Capitalism and with Some Success,” 163.

¹¹⁶ Moses Lowman, *A Dissertation on the Civil Government of the Hebrews, in Which the True Designs, and Nature of Their Government Are Explained; the Justice, Wisdom and Goodness of the Mosaical Constitutions Are Vindicated* (London, 1740), 46-50; William Ogilvie, *An Essay on the Right of Property in Land, with Respect to Its Foundation in the Law of Nature: Its Present Establishment by the Municipal*

French Revolution the Jubilee gained increased currency. The term was employed in 1797 in a Jacobin toast commemorating Bastille Day where they toasted “freedom’s jubilee.”¹¹⁷ It became the centerpiece of a work by the radical Maurice Margarot who was exiled from Britain during the French Revolution on charges of sedition. Following his fourteen year exile, Margarot returned to London and published a pamphlet entitled *Proposal for a Grand National Jubilee: Restoring to Every Man His Own and Thereby Extinguishing Both Want and War.*¹¹⁸ As the title suggests, Margarot made the Mosaic Law and the institution of the Jubilee a centerpiece in his calls for progressive taxation and land-redistribution. The Spa-Fields demonstrations in London during the winter of 1816-17, which were the most radical mass demonstrations of the post-Waterloo period, seem to have been attempts to manufacture a Spencean Jubilee.¹¹⁹ The term was also employed on a banner carried by the Halifax weavers following the massacre at Peterloo which read, “We Groan, being burdened, wanting to be delivered, but we rejoice in the hopes of a Jubilee.”¹²⁰ British Historian Peter Linebaugh has asserted that “by 1820 the Jubilee had become international, even panethnic; it was part of the self-activity of the working class; it was associated with insurrectionary prophecy and insurrectionary deeds.”¹²¹ Due to the currency of the discourse on the Mosaic system of government, and particularly on the concept of the Jubilee, the mere representation of the Israelites could have carried radical political connotations. That becomes even more salient when *The*

Laws of Europe; and the Regulations by Which It Might Be Rendered More Beneficial to the Lower Ranks of Mankind. (London, 1781), 70.

¹¹⁷ “Freedom’s Jubilee,” in *Place Collection* (London: British Library, Bloomsbury, 1797).

¹¹⁸ Maurice Margarot, “Proposal for a Grand National Jubilee: Restoring to Every Man His Own, and Thereby Extinguishing Both Want and War,” (London, 1812).

¹¹⁹ Jeremy Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 48.

¹²⁰ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), 760.

¹²¹ Linebaugh, “Jubilating; or, How the Atlantic Working Class Used the Biblical Jubilee against Capitalism and with Some Success,” 164.

Delivery out of Israel seems to speak to the Israelite predilection for economic advantage and accumulation which the practice of the Jubilee was instituted to foil.

By painting the Israelite obsession with the “flesh-pots” of Egypt, in conjunction with the political emblem of Israel in the Ark of the Covenant, Danby’s work invoked multiple ideas that related to the Mosaic government and were current in British political culture of the time. Danby presented the Israelites as a people fundamentally unable to combat selfish impulses of their own accord; even in the face of God’s protecting hand, they succumbed to their desire to possess and accumulate. Israel was a model society for reformers not only because it was endorsed by God and instituted by his servant Moses but because it was enforced by the authority of law. Moses encouraged the children of Israel to cease their fixation on obtaining comforts and luxuries, yet that was not enough; he also instituted laws that would prevent the most extreme consequences of such behavior because, much as Danby’s painting showed, not even the presence of God in the waves of the Red Sea was enough to alter the hearts of the Israelites. They required a legislative check in order to guard against the negative social consequences of selfish impulses. The reformist journal *The Co-operator* concluded in 1830 that “the first legislator of the Jews seems almost to have had a prophetic eye to the fate which awaited a great portion of society –when the labourer should sink into poverty, degradation and slavery.”¹²² The remission of land under the law of the Jubilee, along with other laws against usury and the prohibition of interest, ensured that the tendencies of the Israelites would not result in widespread social misery.

¹²² “The Bible,” 2.

Egypt versus Israel

Martin, Roberts, and Danby showed certain common preoccupations in their representations of the exodus, though each artist emphasized different elements of the subject. Martin in *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* focused on the plagues that revealed the power of God behind the Israelite cause. More than the other two, he highlighted the role of Moses as the instrument of God whose agency facilitates the God's will on earth. Roberts's painting *The Departure of the Israelites* distanced itself from such miraculous moments of the narrative and opted instead to visualize the nation of Israel leaving Egypt. By representing the Israelites with the trappings of modern nationhood, including banners and ensigns, Roberts's work engaged the contemporary discourse that aligned modern Britain with the nation of Israel. His painting also alluded to the position of the Israelites as slaves by juxtaposing them with the immense architectural structures they had built. Danby's painting *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* concluded the exodus narrative by representing the Red Sea closing on the Egyptians. He emphasized the Israelite's failure to recognize the intervention of God on their behalf by painting some figures as longing instead for the comforts of Egypt. Through these prominent motifs, along with an anachronistic inclusion of the politically-charged Ark of the Covenant, Danby's painting transcended the single moment depicted and alluded to the future travails of Israel in the wilderness.

Each of these paintings evoked ideas that were politically potent in the early nineteenth century. Martin elevated Moses, a figure consistently characterized in the early nineteenth century as a political lawgiver and legislator enacting the government of God. Roberts's painting invoked the heated debate on slavery and abolition, an issue that

was especially pertinent to a religious painting given the influence of Christianity on the abolitionist movement. Danby's anachronisms and conceptions of Israelite character alluded to the legislative policies instituted under Moses as a check on the selfish social behavior depicted in his painting. This message was especially salient in the early nineteenth century when land reformers and early Christian socialists cited the Mosaic government policies as their inspiration and evidence of their divine sanction.

Along with these different specific connections to reformist political discourse each of these paintings revealed a general contrast between the Egyptians and the Israelites. Egypt was represented in them as accomplished, powerful, and advanced, yet the Egyptians were also fundamentally oppressive, arrogant, and violent. The parallels drawn between Babylon and Britain in the previous chapter apply to Egypt as well. However, in Martin's *The Fall of Babylon* and *The Fall of Nineveh* there was no positive foil to those powerful yet fundamentally flawed societies on the verge of destruction. The narrative of the exodus possessed cultural currency because it presented a mirror of modern Britain in ancient Egypt, but it coupled that image with the prospect of a very different type of society. The nation favored by God was oppressed, humble, and holy. Danby's painting presented the Israelites as far from perfect, as they required government checks that would ensure their favored status. Yet in the end, they were protected and watched over by God. Amateur Egyptologist J. C. Pritchard articulated this contrast in 1819:

In the most striking feature in the whole system of civic regulations, the plan adopted by the Hebrew Lawgiver stands in direct opposition to the polity of the Egyptians. The founders of the latter had made it their chief endeavor to depress the mass of the community, in order to pamper the luxury and pride of the distinguishes orders . . . The system established by Moses was, on the contrary, one of perfect equality; not the casual result of circumstances, but the object

which the founder purposely contrived a great part of his civil institutions to uphold.¹²³

The equality-based system of the Israelites, even when not represented directly on canvas, was implied through its conception as the exact inverse of the oppressive system of the Egyptians. In addition, the form of Egyptian government was an absolute monarchy in contrast to the Republic established by Moses. And as Samuel Taylor Coleridge noted, one had to admit that since Moses had been raised by a monarch, his conception of such a dramatically different system must have come “from God.”¹²⁴

Christian reformers in the nineteenth century constantly sought to understand and define the government of God as contained in the bible. God was frequently described in political terms as the monarch of all creation. Yet the bible does not reveal which government system God favors for mankind in the absence of a perfect monarch. For centuries, kings in Europe had cited the monarchy of God as a precedent for their rule on earth. However, by the early 1800s reformers had begun to use religious discourse as a means of combating absolute monarchy. Reformers pointed to the Mosaic society of the Israelites as the only place in the bible where God had instituted a legislative program. Under Moses, monarchy was supplanted by a “Federal Republic” that had a series of laws assuring economic equality. But rather than simply attacking monarchy as oppressive and self-destructive, as Martin’s paintings of Babylon and Nineveh do, the exodus paintings presented both the problem and the solution in the same scene. God destroyed the oppressive monarchical system of Egypt. Out of its ashes he created a new system among the Israelites that inverted everything upon which Egypt’s destruction had

¹²³ J.C. Pritchard, *An Analysis of Egyptian Mythology: To Which Is Subjoined a Critical Examination of the Remains of Egyptian Chronology* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819), 408.

¹²⁴ Coleridge, Patton, and Mann, eds., *Lectures, 1795, on Politics and Religion*, 135.

been premised. The juxtaposition of Egypt and Israel in Martin's, Roberts's and Danby's paintings made them fundamentally political works. In the context of early nineteenth century politics, where the abolition of slavery, alleviation of wage-slavery, and land-redistribution were core components of the reformist platform, these paintings visualized the synchronization between the Bible and modern reformist politics.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

After signing the United States Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress approved a much less famous resolution that appointed Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams to design the Great Seal of the United States of America. Following six weeks of independent work the three men appeared before the Congress to present their respective designs. Somewhat surprisingly, two of the three came back with similar designs. Both Franklin and Jefferson proposed that the Great Seal depict a scene from the narrative of the Israelite exodus from Egypt.¹ Franklin's design depicted Moses "lifting up his Wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh, in his chariot, overwhelmed with the Waters," ringed by the inscription "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God" (Figure 6.1). Jefferson similarly proposed that the seal depict the Israelites "led by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night."² These ideas were eventually discarded in favor of the eagle but it is significant that each man envisioned the Israelite exodus as the narrative that could symbolically encapsulate and articulate their new nation.

I rehearse this story for several reasons. First, it speaks to the political saliency of biblical narratives in the Western world prior to the movement toward secularization

¹ For a summary of the history see "Great Seal of the United States," in *The Encyclopedia Americana* (New York; Chicago: The Encyclopedia Americana Corporation, 1919), 367-71.

² *Ibid.*, 368.

gaining ground in the later nineteenth century. Despite the geographical distance and the decades separating the works of Martin, Roberts, and Danby from the designs of Jefferson and Franklin, biblical representation was a central part of the visual language of both cultures. One factor that made the exodus narrative seem fitting to Franklin and Jefferson was its familiarity among the divided populace in the colonies. Similarly, in Britain during the 1820s there was perhaps no story more recognizable than the exodus. Yet familiarity only partly accounted for its popularity. The exodus also had a political message that resonated in both cultures. At its core, the story was about a heavenly inspired revolution of a people oppressed by a tyrannical king. Franklin and Jefferson considered the story to be overtly political in 1776, and I suggest that the same could be said of the 1820s in Britain. Following the French Revolution and the attempts at domestic insurrection at Peterloo and Cato Street, invoking the story of Moses was a means of speaking analogically about radical politics.

The symbolic potency of the exodus story stemmed partially from its ability to provide political cover for its users. In the American case, colonial leaders worked against widespread beliefs regarding a natural hierarchy many believed to be central to God's providence. Employing a religious narrative that substantiated the right to rebel countered the secular connotations of enlightenment philosophic ideas. The British context in the 1820s was even more volatile. The proponents of traditional social hierarchies branded reformist political movements as irreligious at best and satanic at worst. Regardless of the accuracy of these assertions, this line of argumentation limited the scope of popular support for political reform. In addition, after Peterloo and Cato Street, even diluted radical rhetoric incurred severe legal consequences. This situation

compelled reformers to find a means of expressing themselves that would simultaneously defy a “radical” label and promote reformist ideals. Religion provided just such a means. The story of the exodus simultaneously promoted revolutionary politics and neutralized the possibility of political backlash.

A number of material differences set the designs for the Great Seal apart from the large scale canvases of Martin, Roberts, and Danby, yet with regard to the meanings each representation might have generated, one difference was critical. In America, the subject’s symbolic potency stemmed from its unambiguous metaphorical connotations: the Americans viewed themselves in the guise of ancient Israel to a much greater degree than the British did, frequently citing as evidence their “exodus” from Britain toward a promised land and their providential deliverance from oppressive British rule. This metaphor of America as a modern Israel appeared in American painting of the early nineteenth century done in “the style of Martin.” Henry Cheever Pratt’s *Moses on the Mount* (1829), a work originally attributed to Thomas Cole, was clearly indebted to Martin’s work (Figure 6.2). It was painted during a period that art historian Elwood C. Parry has called “the high-water mark of Martin’s influence in America,” when Martin’s “name or works seemed to be everywhere at once.”³ Like Franklin and Jefferson’s designs for the Great Seal, Pratt’s work invoked the common metaphorical connection between modern America and ancient Israel that Martin’s works also would have benefitted from when they crossed the Atlantic in print form.

The British context was more ambiguous. Britain lacked the clear metaphorical connections to ancient Israel America possessed. In addition, Martin’s Roberts’s, and

³ Ellwood C. Parry III, “When a Cole Is Not a Cole: Henry Cheever Pratt’s *Moses on the Mount*” *American Art Journal* 16, no. 1 (1984): 83.

Danby's paintings of the exodus were accompanied by biblical paintings of destruction. When considering the collective body of British paintings of biblical themes done in "the style of Martin," the overarching message was not one of certain destruction or deliverance but of human agency. Britain was not intrinsically linked with either Israel or its inversions—Babylon, Egypt, and Nineveh—it could potentially go in either direction. These paintings posited possibilities rather than assigning destiny. Whether the British might be delivered like the Israelites or destroyed like the Egyptians was contingent on the state of society. The works of these three artists spoke to problems within British society and implied mechanisms for their amelioration. The paintings suggested that social reforms aimed at distributing wealth more broadly and alleviating physical oppression would allow Britain to become like the Israelites and receive heavenly protection amid the oncoming storms of the apocalypse. Alternatively, Britain might suffer the calamities that befell Babylon, Nineveh, and Egypt.

My central contention is that many people viewed these paintings through a political framework in the 1820s and 1830s, and that the meanings generated by them were aligned with the rhetoric and policies of those in favor of political reformation. In support of my argument I have analyzed the coherence between the discursive implications of these religious subjects in concert with the manner of their representation. The frequent employment of biblical narratives in political writings and their repeated use by several artists during a concentrated period of time provides a firm basis for positing connections between the visual and the political. In addition, Martin's radical opinions, which were publically known, his devotion to public improvement projects, and the

radical beliefs held by his circle of acquaintances, reveal the artist to have been an individual focused on social progress rather than imminent world destruction.⁴

More importantly what the paintings represented and how they represented it aligned them with specific reformist political policies. The deep perspective, masses of small figures, and kings positioned prominently in the foreground of the destruction paintings suggested the social nature of Britain's sins and the need for broad political solutions to stave off the punishing hand of God. The large-scale architectural structures painted in the scenes fostered a view of these distant lands as types for modern London. In the exodus paintings, the implicit condemnation of slavery, the prominence accorded the "great legislator" Moses, and the foreground motifs features in Danby's paintings connoted the economic programs of ancient Israel that accompanied calls for reformist political proposals such as land redistribution. Taken together, these elements point strongly toward the reformist political connotations these works had in the early nineteenth century.

One more crucial idea binds the paintings together and substantiates their political connotations, namely, the theme of special providence. The belief in special providence concerns how God interacts with humankind. The word "providence" was ever-present in the writings of the nineteenth century, including those that were secular, yet there was a disagreement as to how providence operated.⁵ Some believed in a "Newtonian" or "natural law" conception of providence in which nature alone manifested the hand of providence. Adherents of natural law providence believed that God created a self-

⁴ Martin's circle of radical friends has recently been written about at great length by Max Adams, *The Firebringers: Art, Science, and the Struggle for Liberty in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Quercus, 2009).

⁵ Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries, and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 146.

sustaining system, thus he did not need to intervene directly in the processes of history. Biblical moments of divine intervention, such as the worldwide flood or the parting of the Red Sea, were de-emphasized and explained away as metaphor. In contrast, those who believed in special providence emphasized the biblical episodes in which God actively intervened in the affairs of humanity and altered the course of history. Believers in special providence envisioned a Creator who was actively engaged with his creations and exercised his will to correct gross manifestations of evil and injustice.

Martin spent the better part of his career painting moments of special providence. His first major painting was *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still* (1816), a scene emblematic of the argument for special providence (Figure 6.3). In the Old Testament, the people of Gibeon made a peace alliance with the Israelites, an act which offended a number of other regional tribes which disliked Israel. These tribes then united in an attack on Gibeon. The people of Gibeon called on the Israelites to honor their alliance and Joshua led the Israelite troops in an attack against those assailing Gibeon. The Israelites were successful in battle and their enemies fled, but the Lord was said to have caused the sun to stand still for an entire day so that the Israelites could pursue and eliminate their enemies rather than allowing them to escape during the night.⁶ The story was somewhat obscure and rarely represented by artists. Martin chose this unusual subject for a painting the success of which would have offered him entrance to the upper echelon of the British art world, the failure of which would confine him to mediocrity.

In the painting, Joshua stands in the center foreground as the Israelite armies amass from above and below. The composition is similar to one Martin employed in *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* (1824), with the key figure reaching up toward a bright light in

⁶ Joshua 10: 1-13

the upper-right corner while God sends dark clouds of hail down the side of the scene (Figure 6.4). A prominent city sits positioned on a hill above Joshua, bathed in the light of heaven and protected by the intervening presence of God. The left half of the canvas contains a deep vista of immense mountains and wide valleys where the Israelite armies pursue the aggressors. Thousands of minute battle-clad figures march from the city above, past the figure of Joshua, and into the distant battlefield. Despite these numerous figures, the swirling vortex of dark clouds and the contrasting bright light from above signify God's presence in causing the sun to stand still and fighting the battle for the Israelites.

This moment, where God directly contradicted and altered the laws of nature, encapsulated the arguments for special providence. While nature and reason were not totally rejected, believers in special providence envisioned a God that intervened in the process of history, often in ways that defied nature and reason. The theme of special providence became part of Martin and his followers' standard artistic formula. Martin painted the finger of God writing on a wall in *Belshazzar's Feast*; his paintings of destruction in Nineveh and Babylon contained invading armies yet emphasized the God-controlled elements as creating the chaos; another of Martin's well-known works, *The Deluge* (1834), depicted a narrative commonly cited in support of special providence. In addition to Martin, Roberts pictured *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt* (1829), the culminating event in a series of miraculous interventions by God, which included the successive plagues and miracles directed by Moses. Danby represented the parting and closing of the Red Sea in *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt* (1825), which was perhaps the most famous moment of special providence in the bible.

Despite the range of interpretive possibilities available to viewers of these paintings, it would have been difficult to deny their support for the concept of special providence.

These paintings need to be seen in the context of a theological debate over providence, which was heavily politicized in the early nineteenth century due to its implications for the emerging science of political economy. Political economy was a newly conceived scientifically based mechanism for regulating economic affairs that dominated the political discourse of the 1820s.⁷ One observer remarked in 1826, “We hear nothing on all sides, at dinner parties, in church, and at the theatre, but discussion on political economy and the distresses of the times.”⁸ Political scientist David McNally has asserted that by the 1820s

arguments for trade unions rights, wage regulation, poor relief, popular education, and so on were now invariably conducted on the terrain of political economy. The result was that . . . the dividing line came to be, increasingly, not alternative ‘reform’ strategies . . . but alternative notions of political economy.⁹

Political economy underlay every argument for and against government reform in the early nineteenth century, and by invoking special providence, these paintings engaged in another dimension of reformist political discourse.

The debate over political economy came to prominence with the writings of Thomas Malthus. Malthus began publishing in 1798 and continued into the 1830s.¹⁰

⁷ What was called “political economy” in the early nineteenth century is more commonly referred to today as simply “economics.”

⁸ H. U. Addington to Charles Vaughn, 2 Mar. 1826, reprinted in Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press; Clarendon Press, 1988).

⁹ David McNally, *Against the Market: Political Economy, Market Socialism and the Marxist Critique* (London: Verso, 1993), 106.

¹⁰ While there is some scholarly debate regarding the influence of Malthus during the 1820s and 1830s, most concur that his writings were highly influential and central to the political debates of the time. See Mitchell Dean, *The Constitution of Poverty: Toward a Genealogy of Liberal Governance* (London; New York: Routledge, 1991), 103; Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1984), 126; Anne Digby, “Malthus and the Reform of the Poor Law,” in

Malthusian ideas centered on population growth and the resources such expansion demanded. Because he believed resources were in danger of being outstripped, Malthus portrayed phenomena such as war, disease, and famine in a positive light. Perhaps most controversial was his stance concerning the lower classes. Malthus believed that the population dilemma stemmed from poor people reproducing too frequently, thus he proposed restraints on the right of poor people to marry. Growing adherence to the principles of Malthus culminated in the passage of the “New Poor Law” in 1834 which made conditions for obtaining government relief so deplorable that not even the most impoverished individuals would choose to submit. One historian has called the 1834 New Poor Law “the most reviled and hated piece of legislation ever foisted upon the British working class.”¹¹

The viability of Malthusian political economy hinged on the notion of general or Newtonian providence. Malthus’s theories were predicated on certain constants that he saw as part of the natural providential order. The existence of poverty within that order justified its continued existence and discredited attempts to eradicate it. As one critic wrote in 1821, proponents of Malthusian political economy “taught that misery and want were the mere inflictions of Providence: evils inevitably inherent in our nature, which could not be relieved, not even mitigated by any institutions of men. That, like pestilence

Malthus Past and Present, ed. Jacques Dupaquier, A. Fauve-Chamoux, E. Grebenik (London: Academic, 1983), 194.

¹¹ Gregory Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millenium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 20. See also David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 104. The New Poor Law act of 1834 replaced the old English Poor law. Following the enclosure of common lands and the onset of industrialization, the amount of money needed to support the poor through the poor laws increased dramatically. In particular, so-called “outdoor relief,” which involved giving money directly to the poor rather than placing them in workhouses, saw a sharp rise: during the 1780s the poor laws cost roughly 2 million pounds annually; by 1832 that had increased to 8.6 million pounds. Malthus argued that “outdoor relief” encouraged idle habits as well as the creation of large families, which in turn fostered poverty. Therefore, the New Poor Laws made workhouses the only means of poor relief and intentionally made conditions within those workhouses so deplorable that very few individuals would actually enter them voluntarily.

and famine, they were only ministers of God, executing his eternal decrees.”¹² One contemporary historian has pointed out that in the framework of political economy, “poverty could be seen as part of Divine providence, if not quite of Divine creation; specifically, as a sign and consequence of God’s judgment on the wicked.”¹³ This view of the natural world as entirely providential shifted the responsibility for the ills of the world from humanity to God; Malthusians argued that what God created only God, through nature, could eradicate. Though Christianity had traditionally compelled people to assist the poor, after Malthus “the right to charity was no longer based on need, or upon the duties of stewardship over God’s creations. Instead, the economic system and its accompanying rights and duties, as well as the divinely inspired population principle itself, took priority over the Christian duty of charity.”¹⁴

When the *Edinburgh Review* began publication in 1802, popularizing the idea of political economy was one of its chief functions. By 1814 the journal had 14,000 subscribers and by the 1820s all the important proponents of political economy wrote in its pages. Though political economy began as an obscure “science,” by the mid 1820s it had been popularized “amongst all strata of society.”¹⁵ An anonymous “Labourer” writing against political economy in an 1825 pamphlet wrote,

Not only do [the capitalists] appropriate the produce of the labourer; but they have succeeded in persuading him that they are his benefactors and employers. At least, such are the doctrines of political economy; and capitalists may well be

¹² Piercy Ravenstone, *A Few Doubts as to the Correctness of Some Opinions Generally Entertained on the Subjects of Population and Political Economy* (London, 1821), 10.

¹³ J. R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834*, Studies in Social History (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), xiv.

¹⁴ Claeys, *Machinery, Money and the Millenium: From Moral Economy to Socialism, 1815-60*, 20.

¹⁵ Noel W. Thompson, *The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 58.

pleased with a science which both justifies their claims, and holds them up to our admiration, as the great means of civilizing and improving the world.¹⁶

Because of its scientific backing, many considered political economy to be unassailable. Yet although the science was difficult to refute, reformers recognized that the underlying basis of political economy was vulnerable.

During the second decade of the nineteenth century, reformers began attacking political economy because its principles ran counter to Christian morality. Thomas Spence's successor, Thomas Evans, referred to Malthus as "the priest of paganism" and wrote sarcastically in *Christian Policy*,

Malthus, the mighty Malthus! The Great philosopher Malthus!! The Church of England divine Malthus!!! The hireling of pagan landlords, Malthus!!! Tells you you have come into a world already possessed, *lawfully possessed*, and therefore if you cannot find labour you must die; the possessors are not bound to employ you, to feed you, no not so much as to bestow on you the smallest charity.¹⁷

But it was not until 1819 that a significant political split emerged between those devoted to the principles of political economy and those opposed to it on the basis of Christian principles. A bill designed to protect children in factories from the worst abuses was led by the Bishop of Chester, George Henry Law, and Christian morality was the chief argument in favor of the legislation, while opponents cited political economy's *laissez faire* approach to the situation.¹⁸ Prior to 1819 Christianity and political economy had largely been united—Malthus himself was a reverend in the Church of England—but following this piece of child protection legislation, there was a significant rift between political economy and Christian morality.

¹⁶ A Labourer, "Labour Defended against the Claims of Capital," (London: Knight and Lacey, Paternoster-Row, 1825), 21.

¹⁷ Thomas Evans, *Christian Policy the Salvation of the Empire. Being a Clear ... Examination into the Causes That Have Produced the Impending, Unavoidable National Bankruptcy* (London: published for the author, 1816), 18.

¹⁸ R. A. Soloway, *Prelates and People: Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England, 1783-1852* (London: R. Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), 198.

The 1820s witnessed both a popularization of political economy and the rise of a significant opposition to political economy based on Christian principles. This opposition spoke in terms of a “moral economy” rather than a political one. While political economists aimed solely at increasing national production, the moral economists focused on how wealth was best distributed and used.¹⁹ In an 1820 review of a book by Thomas Chalmers, who presented an apparent paradox of being a Christian as well as a known supporter of political economy, the reviewer described his perplexity as to how these two ideologies could coexist in a single human being.²⁰ Perhaps the moral economist Piercy Ravenstone outlined the contradictions most eloquently:

It is a cold and dreary system which represents our fellow-creatures as so many rivals and enemies, which makes us believe that their happiness is incompatible with our own, which builds our wealth on their poverty, and teaches that their numbers cannot consist with our comforts and enjoyments which would persuade us to look on the world in the light of a besieged town, where the death of our neighbors is hailed with secret satisfaction . . . It cannot add much to our veneration for the divine nature, to see Omnipotence can devise no better plan than misery and extermination, for correcting those defects in our system.²¹

Ravenstone noted that at the core of political economy lay a perverse conception of providence in relation to humankind. Malthus asserted that relieving the poor ran counter to providence and was therefore fundamentally wrong. Ravenstone recognized that such a conception of providence undermined and inverted the foundation of Christian morality. This line of argumentation was highlighted by a barrister in the early 1840s

¹⁹ Thompson, *The People's Science: The Popular Political Economy of Exploitation and Crisis 1816-34*, 28.

²⁰ “Art IV. The Christian and Civic Economy of Large Towns,” *British Review and London Critical Journal* 16, no. 31 (1820): 72.

²¹ Ravenstone, *A Few Doubts as to the Correctness of Some Opinions Generally Entertained on the Subjects of Population and Political Economy*, 16-19.

who referred to the adherents of political economy as “sages in the satanic school of politics.”²²

The most damning argument against political economy stemmed from an alternative understanding of God’s providence. Rather than seeing nature as a manifestation of providence, moral economists promoted the idea of special providence by emphasizing biblical moments when God himself defied the normal processes of nature and intervened to correct injustices, protect his chosen people, or punish the wicked. Historian Boyd Hilton examined voting records from the period in question and demonstrated that the most extreme evangelicals tended to vote for interventionist or paternal social policies while the more moderate evangelicals favored *laissez faire* policies. Hilton concluded that this discrepancy arose because of their differing views on providence. He writes,

Moderate evangelicals seemed to match their *laissez faire* or neutral conception of providence with a similar approach to the ‘Conditions of England.’ They wished to make society operate as close to ‘nature’ as possible by repealing interventionist laws. Then men could be left to work out their own salvation . . . Governments should interfere with men’s lives as little as possible, so that men can exercise ‘self-help’—the only means to salvation.²³

In contrast, the more extreme evangelicals believed “that God exercised a perpetual superintendence by means of special providences.” Therefore, “the task of temporal governments was to imitate the divine, to exercise their own paternal superintendence in the light of these providences—to interpret them, and legislate accordingly.”²⁴ In other words, those who believed that God governed the universe passively favored a passive

²² Samuel Richard Bosanquet, “The Commercial Empire,” in *Principia: A Series of Essays on the Principles of Evil Manifesting Themselves in These Last Times in Religion, Philosophy, and Politics* (London: 1843), 312.

²³ Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865*, 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

government, and in turn, those who believed that God governed actively were more likely to favor a government actively correcting social injustices.

By representing biblical moments that emphasized the concept of special providence, the works of John Martin, David Roberts, and Francis Danby attacked the foundation of Malthusian political economy. Their repeated visualizations of God's dramatic intervention openly critiqued the belief in general or natural providence that underlay Malthusian thought. If, as the paintings suggest, the hand of God made the sun stand still, wrote glowing words on a wall, crushed entire cities, and parted the Red Sea, he might not favor the invisible hand of the market. Moral economists argued that merciful economic intervention would correspond with God's pattern of governing and possibly engender the type of divine protection afforded the ancient Israelites.

Although the majority of Martin's works envisioned biblical scenes where the hand of God was metaphorically implied, only once did the artist literally paint the hand of God. In 1825 Martin exhibited *The Creation of Light* (Figure 6.5). The location of the painting remains unknown, but Martin repeated the composition several times during his printmaking career and included it in both his *Paradise Lost* and his *Illustrated Bible*. More than any other work by Martin, this painting spoke directly to the theological questions about the nature of God that underlay the controversies rehearsed in this study.

In the painting, Martin positioned a shadowy God floating through a scene of earthly elements still in the process of creation. Clouds swirl in a characteristic Martin vortex around the exterior edges of the canvas so that the central figure is encompassed by churning primordial matter. A dark sea appears in the middle ground and extends to a distant horizon. Above the horizon, planets and stars are juxtaposed with jagged shards

of lightning. In the upper left-hand corner the sun beams down onto the central area, creating strands of light that cut through the darkness. These beams of light recall those in his paintings of *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still* and *The Seventh Plague of Egypt* but in this painting, instead of light alluding to the presence of God, it reveals it. As the light filters through the clouds an immense and semi-translucent being, as if composed of cloud itself, becomes illuminated. This massive figure of God reaches up toward the light in the corner, apparently wielding the very powers of creation and controlling the light descending from above. The pose is reminiscent of the figures of Moses and Joshua yet in this instance the being wields power rather than acting as an intermediary to a higher power. The surviving black-and-white engravings make it difficult to appreciate the color of the original painting but a contemporary reviewer remarked on its “contrast of colours, brilliant azure and red, thrown out by black” and described their affect as “dazzlingly powerful.”²⁵

The sharpest criticism of the painting came from those who opposed it on theological grounds. Many, including the painters James Northcote and Benjamin Haydon, objected to the painting of a god-like being on such an immense scale. Haydon remarked, “It is the grossest of all gross ideas to make the power of essence of the creator depend on size.”²⁶ An art critic similarly wrote, “the figure [of God] is too distinctly developed—we should rather not have been able to distinguish the features.”²⁷ This objection related to both the scale of the figure and to the very idea of picturing God in

²⁵ “Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence,” *Belle Assemblée; or Court and fashionable magazine* 1, no. 4 (1825): 170.

²⁶ Benjamin Robert Haydon and Willard Bissell Pope, *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon.*, 5 vols. (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1963), 3:10-11, 7 March 1825.

²⁷ “Monthly View of New Publications, Music, the English and Foreign Drama, the Fine Arts, Literary and Scientific Intelligence,” 170.

human form. Although painting God as a man had both a biblical basis and many artistic precedents, it is noteworthy that in this context it offended several observers.

I suggest that this offense stemmed as much from the contemporary debate over the nature of God and the stance that Martin took on that issue through his paintings as it did from artistic considerations. Those who proposed a belief in a general or natural providence that relied on a distant and impersonal God would have found Martin's painting inaccurate and potentially threatening. Martin's God looked like a man who was actively engaged in the process of creation. He represented creation as a physical rather than a mental act—more akin to building a house than making things magically appear. The painting presented God as a being who worked to create and who by implication might continue to work on behalf of humankind. In contrast to the distant, passive, and dormant God upon which the theories of political economy rested, Martin represented God as relatable, engaged, and laboring. This conception of God was a visual equivalent of the argument formulated against political economy by the moral economists.

Martin's frequent representations of cataclysm and destruction have caused many to see him as a type of doomsday prophet who viewed humanity as ripe for godly punishments. This view fails to account for the complexity of the ideas his works invoked. Martin painted during a period of severe political tensions, when referring directly to reformist politics in a public context could have had serious repercussions. English historian Tim Fulford has written that at the time, "Publishing works that predicted the downfall of the kingdom and its replacement by a 'political millennium' in which hierarchy was abolished and property shared in common, was a sure way to give

the authorities the evidence they needed to imprison one.”²⁸ By employing religious narratives, Martin and his followers were able to allude to reformist political programs without incurring the wrath of the authorities. Rather than interpreting these paintings as bleak predictions of a violent future, I believe they should be viewed as mechanisms of political motivation. Painting the destruction of ancient cities was designed to motivate viewers to want to avoid such destruction in the future. In an age when political reformation was posited as the key to accomplishing that end, these works could be viewed as supporting reform. Furthermore, by coupling paintings of downfall with paintings of deliverance, as these artists did, an even more specific political program comes into focus. Because reformers cited the economic and social policies of the Israelites under Moses as the ideal model for government in the present, paintings of those subjects could connote particular political policies such as the abolition of slavery, land redistribution, and other measures designed to foster economic equality.

The famous early nineteenth-century writer Edward Bulwer-Lytton called John Martin “the greatest, most lofty, the most permanent, the most original genius of his age.”²⁹ History has disagreed with much of Bulwer-Lytton’s assessment, though it is still possible to see how Martin could easily be characterized “most lofty” artist of his age. Martin’s paintings never failed to amaze audiences of his day, despite the diverse range of emotions they provoked. In some ways his themes were so “lofty” that connecting them with something as concrete and substantive as political policy might not seem self-evident. Yet while he conceived of subjects that were unearthly, his paintings evoked ideas that were bound to the real world of nineteenth-century Britain. Despite the

²⁸ Tim Fulford, *Romanticism and Millenarianism* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 17.

²⁹ Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *England and the English*, 2d ed. (London: R. Bentley, 1833), 2:260.

fantastic nature of the works, in the end, as one commentator noted in 1820, “legitimate or illegitimate, there was a spell in Martin’s art. It had power over the eye, and often led captive the judgment.”³⁰

³⁰ “John Martin,” *The Athenaeum*, no. 1374 (1854): 246.

List of Figures



Figure 2.1. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821, Oil on Canvas, 160 x 249 cm, Private Collection.

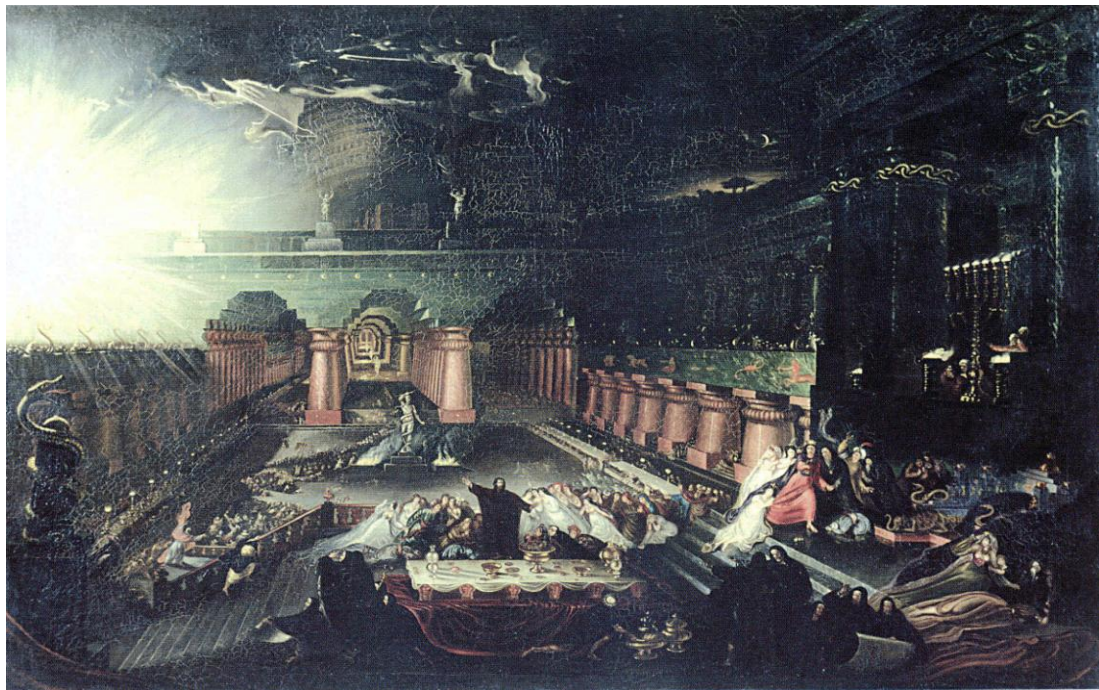


Figure 2.2. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, after 1821, Oil on canvas, 153 x 222 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, U.K. (probably a later copy done by Martin).



Figure 2.3. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1826, Mezzotint with etching, 54 x 72 cm, British Museum, London.

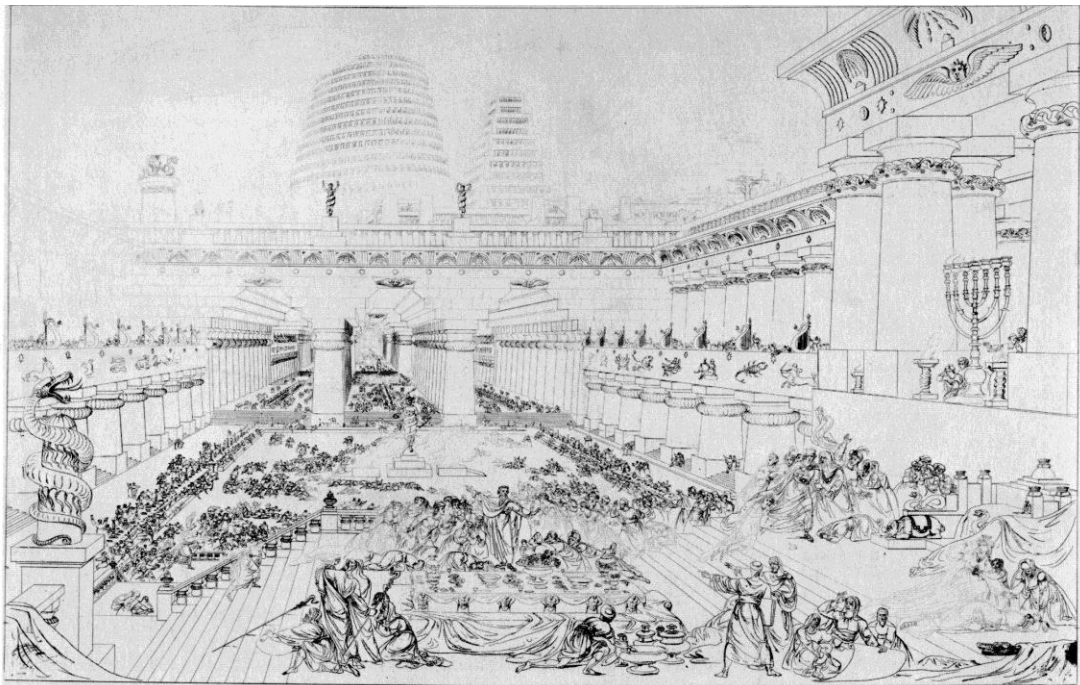


Figure 2.4. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1826, etching, 50 x 74 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 2.5. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail from mezzotint).



Figure 2.6. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail from mezzotint).

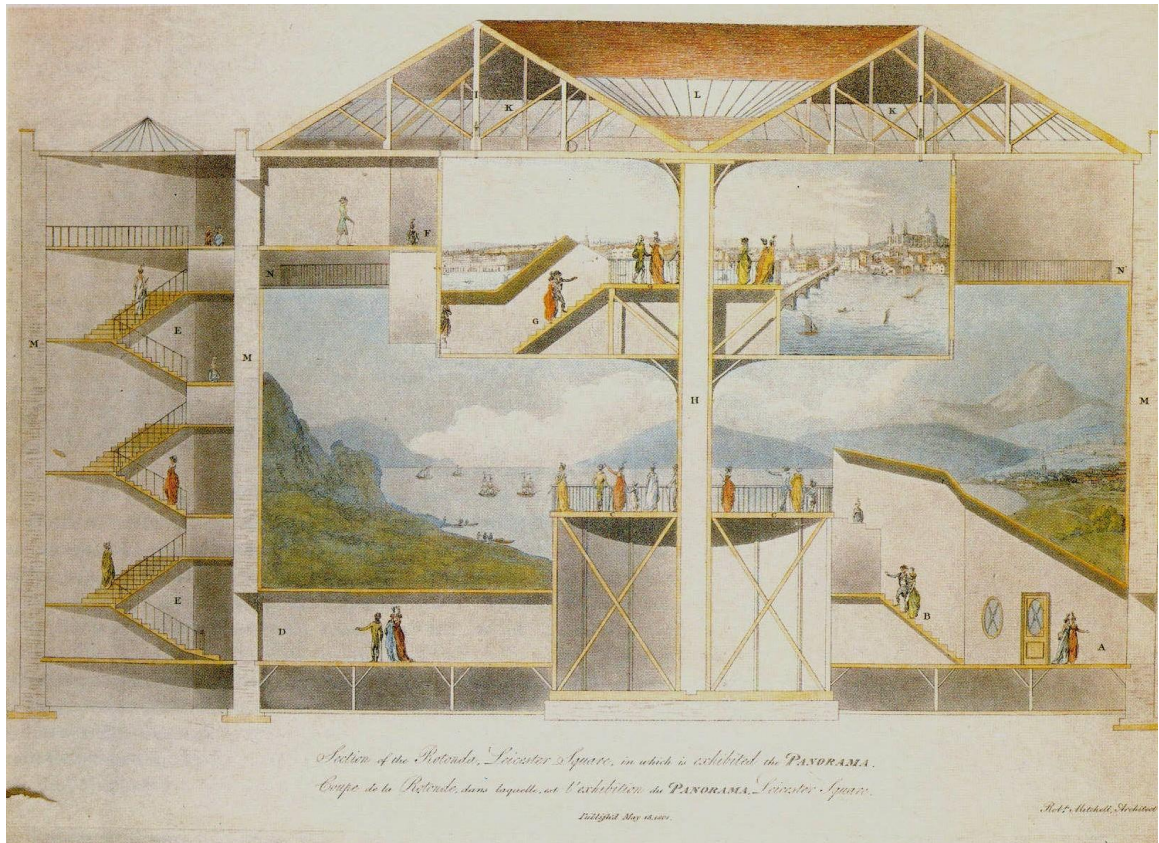


Figure 2.7. Robert MITCHELL, *Section of the Rotunda, Leicester Square*, in 'Plans and Views in Perspective,' 1801.



Figure 2.8. Samuel Rawle and George Hunt, *The Geometrical Ascent to the Galleries, in the Colosseum, Regent's Park*, 1829, Aquatint on paper, Guildhall Library, London.

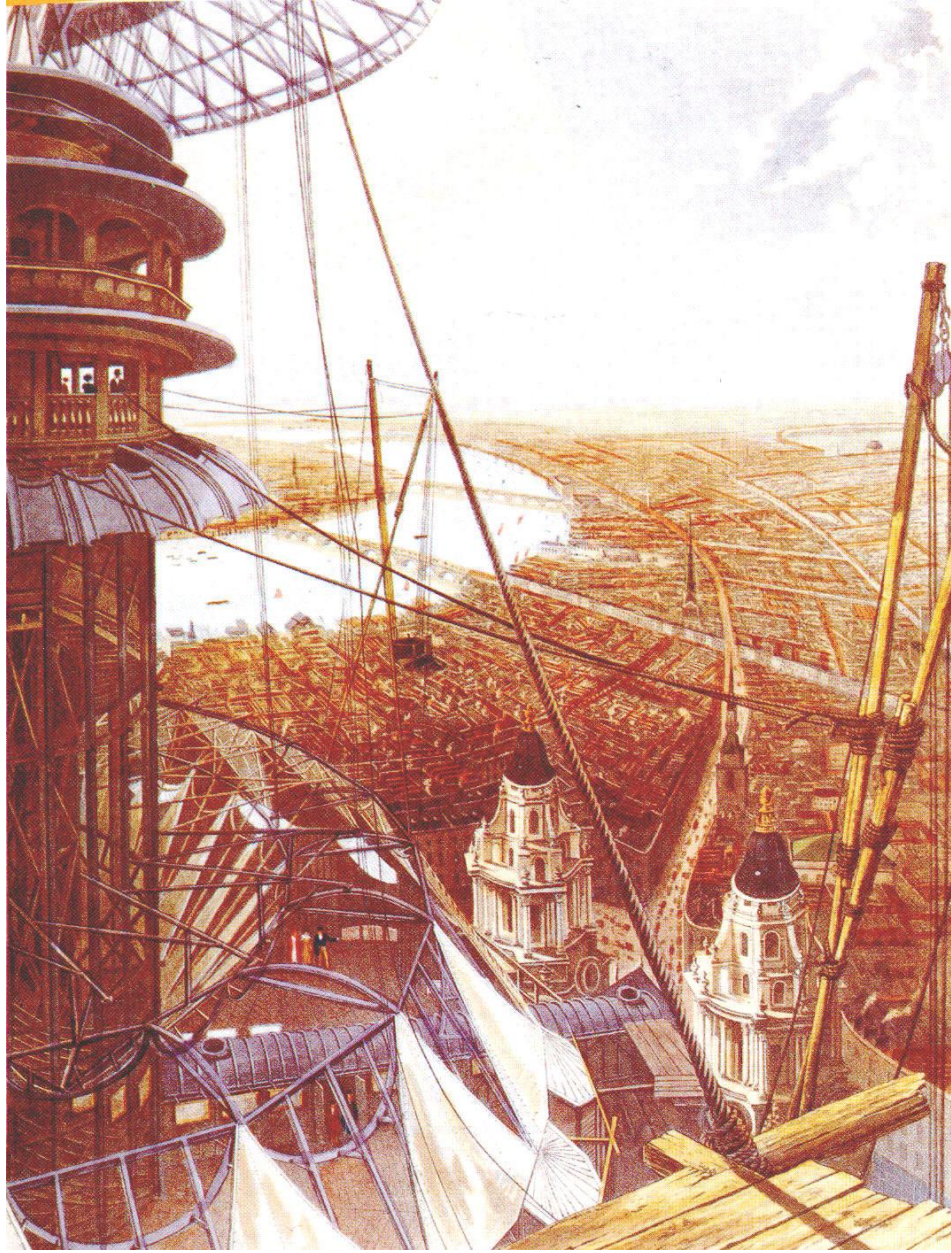


Figure 2.9. Anonymous, *Bird's-Eye View from the Staircase and Upper Part of the Pavillion in the Colosseum, Regent's Park*, 1829, Aquatint on Paper, Guildhall Library, London.



Figure 2.10. Edward Francis Burney, *The Eidophusikon*, 1782, watercolor on paper, 21 x 29 cm, British Museum, London.

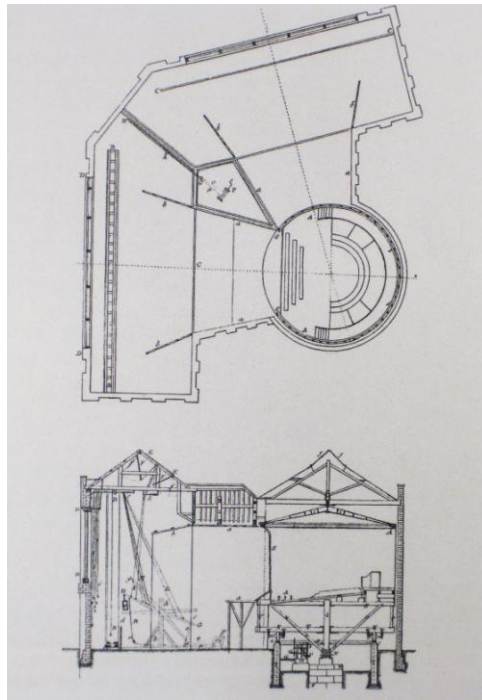


Figure 2.11. A. Pugin and J. Morgan, *Plan and Section for Arrowsmith's Diorama Building*, London, J.D. Dingers Polytechnisches Journal, vol 17, 1825.

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MR. MARTIN'S *July 26*
GRAND PICTURE OF *1833*

Belshazzar's FEAST,

PAINTED WITH DIORAMIC EFFECT, IS NOW OPEN AT
THE
Queen's Bazaar, Oxford Street.

As a subject for a Diorama, this is perhaps one of the most magnificent that could have been selected from Scripture History;—in grandeur of design and execution it surpasses any picture ever before exhibited in this country. It is five times as large as the late Mr. B. West's celebrated picture of Death on the Pale Horse; or a better idea may be formed, by observing it occupies in magnitude the space of Four Diorama Views; and such is the extraordinary illusion with which it is painted, that the mind is led to contemplate it as a subject in reality.

The beautiful and interesting Exhibition of the Physiorama, which contains Fourteen Views, has been added to the Diorama, forming together but one Exhibition.

Admittance One Shilling.

J. & G. Nichols, Printers, Earl's Court, Cranbourn Street, Soho.

Figure 2.12. Mr. Martin's Belshazzar's Feast painted with Dioramic Effect, Advertisement, 1833.

There will be a GRAND FEAST
At the Queen's Bazaar, Oxford Street.

To which the Royal Family the Members of both Houses of Parliament, and all the Nobility and Gentry will be invited, after the close of Mr. D. ROBERTS'S Grand Picture of

The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt,
Which will take place soon after Easter.

The above subject is the most splendid and has been the most successful Diorama ever exhibited in this country, occupying in magnitude the space of FOUR DIORAMA VIEWS, and surpassing in grandeur of design and execution, every former Exhibition of the sort. It is the first illustration of Scripture History ever painted on so grand a scale, and has been visited by thousands of the religious of all denominations, who rarely visit exhibitions. The following very brief description will convey some idea of its general attraction and effect.

The Picture represents their departure at the dawn of day, the morning sun lighting up the summits of the gigantic pyramids in the distance, then falling in stately lines across the obelisks and pinnacles, that adorn the prodigious exhibition of Palaces and Temples, which have been richly imagined and beautifully executed.

On the left of the picture is the royal party of Pharaoh and his Court witnessing the departure, which he reluctantly permitted but dared not oppose. Opposite, in front of a huge Egyptian statue, are the two leaders, Moses and Aaron, and the space between the buildings, is entirely filled with the continuous mass of thousands of Israelites, marching out in order with the Banners, Ensigns, Camels, Flocks, Elephants, &c.

The Physiorama, contains 14 beautiful Views,
has been fitted up in a gallery 200 feet long, and added to the Diorama, forming together only one Exhibition.

Admittance One Shilling.

J. & G. Nichols, Printer, Earl's Court, Cranbourn Street.

Figure 2.13. Handbill Advertising the Departure of the Israelites Diorama, 1833.



Figure 2.14. George Scharf, *The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1828*, watercolor, 19 x 26 cm, Museum of London.



Figure 2.15. Edward Francis Burney, *The Royal Academy Exhibition of 1784: The Great Room, East Wall*, 1784, pen and grey ink and grey wash, and watercolour, 34 x 49 cm, British Musuem.



Figure 2.16. William Angus After Daniel Dodd, *Representations of the Exhibition of Paintings at Somerset House, 1784*, engraving.



Figure 2.17. Benjamin West, *Moses Receiving the Laws on Mount Sinai (or Moses as the First Lawgiver)*, 1784, oil on canvas, 579 x 396 cm, London, Palace of Westminster.



Figure 2.18. Pietro Antonio Martini, *The Salon of 1785*, 1785, etching, 34 x 51 cm, British Museum.



Figure 2.19. Pietro Antonio Martini after Johann Heinrich Ramberg, *The Exhibition of the Royal Academy*, 1787, hand-coloured etching, 38 x 53 cm, British Museum.



Figure 2.20. A. Pugin, *Gallery of the British Institution*, from "The Magazine of Fine Arts," 1821, etching, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 2.21. A. Pugin, *Gallery of the British Institution*, from "The Magazine of Fine Arts," 1821 (detail).



Figure 2.22. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, after 1821, Oil on glass, Syon House, London.



Figure 2.23. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail of glass version at Syon House).

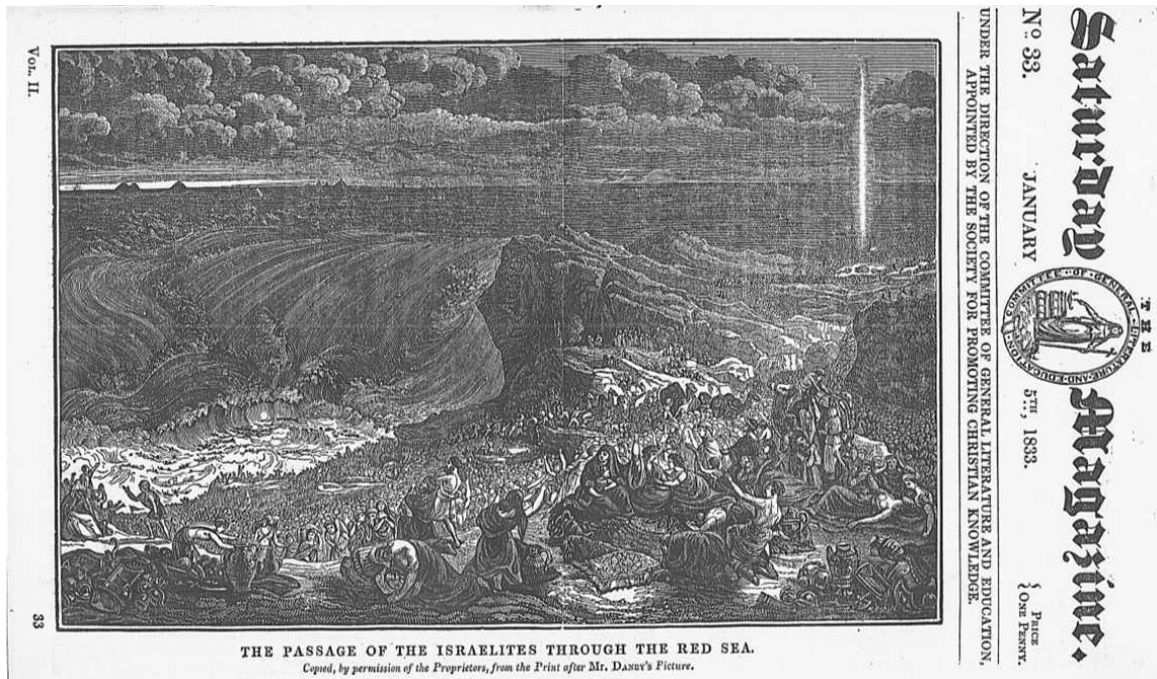


Figure 2.24. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, from 'The Saturday Magazine,' 1833, woodcut.



Figure 3.1. Benjamin West, *The Opening of the Four Seals, or Death on a Pale Horse*, 1796, Oil on canvas, 447 x 764.5 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



Figure 3.2. J.M.W. Turner, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, 1800, Oil on canvas, 122 x 181 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art.



Figure 3.3. James Gillray, *The Prophet of the Hebrews - The Prince of Peace Conducting the Jews to the Promised Land*, published 5 March 1795 by Hannah Humphrey, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.

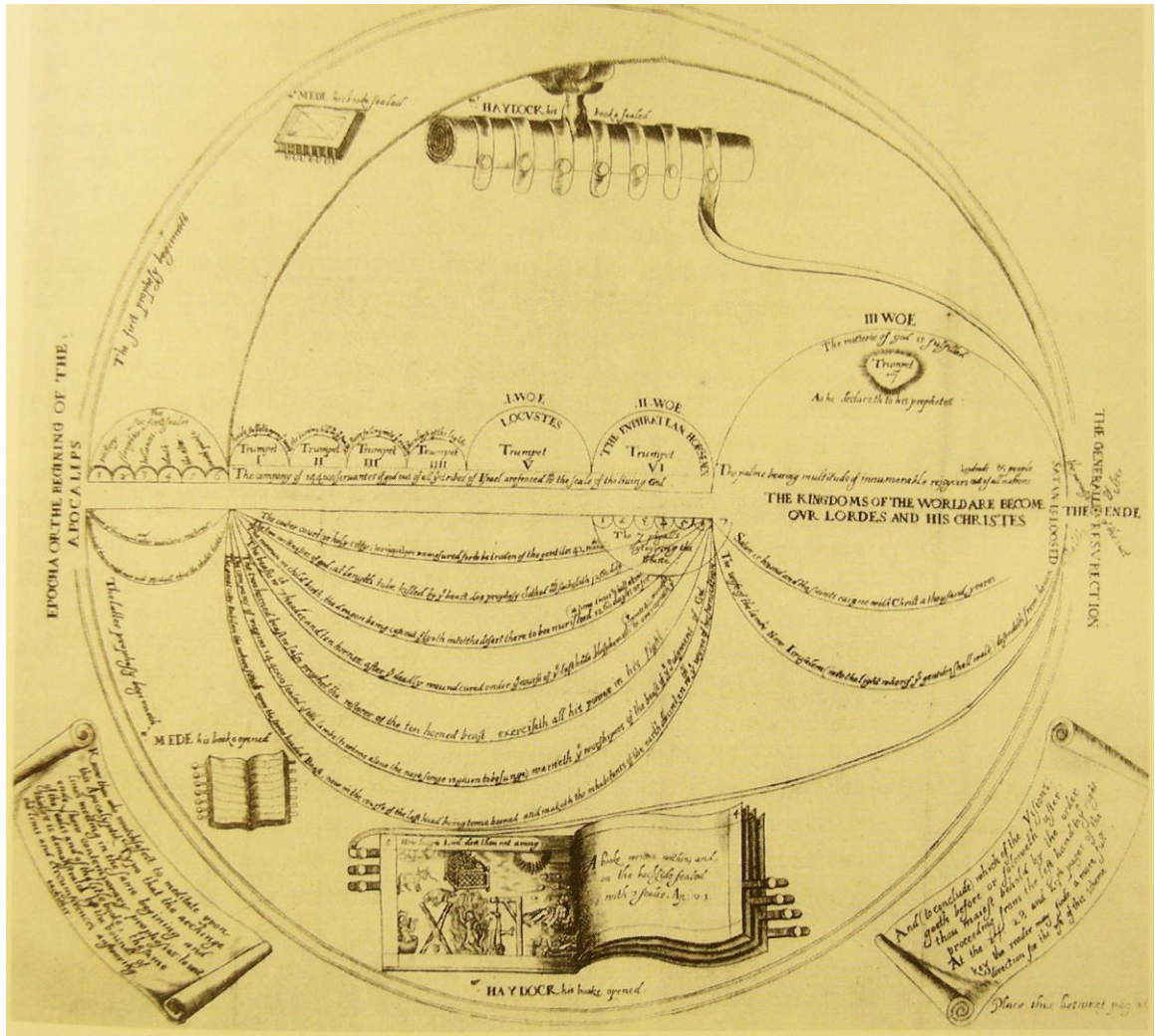


Figure 3.4. Joseph Mede, "Apocalyptick Scheme" from Key of the Revelation, 1650, fold out diagram, 35 x 40 cm, British Library, London.

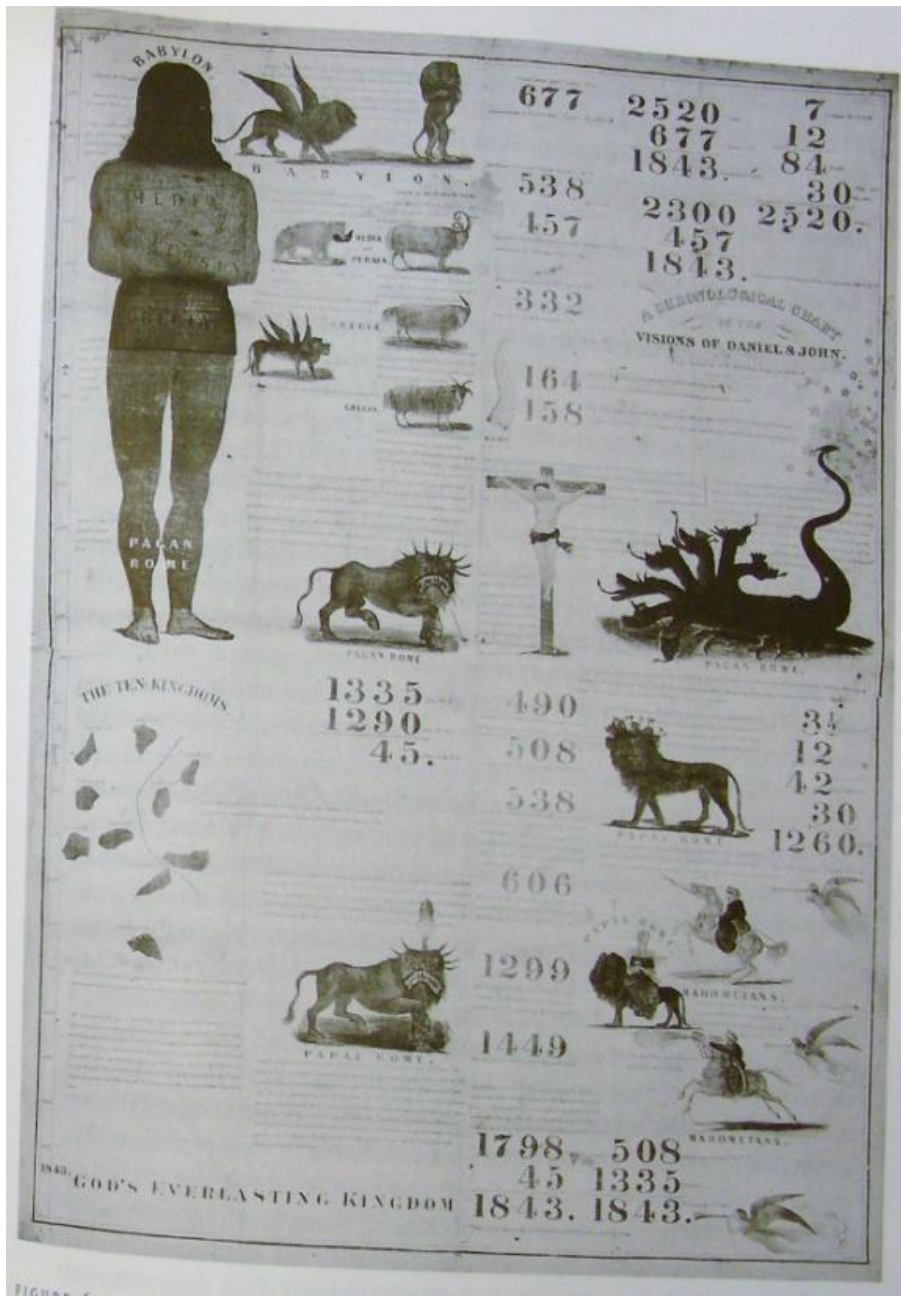


Figure 3.5. "A Chronological Chart of the Visions of Daniel and John" published by Joshua V. Himes, 1842, hand-tinted lithograph, B.W. Thayer & Co., Boston.



Figure 3.6. Benjamin West, *The Destruction of the Old Beast and the False Prophet*, 1804, Oil on canvas, 99 x 143 cm, Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

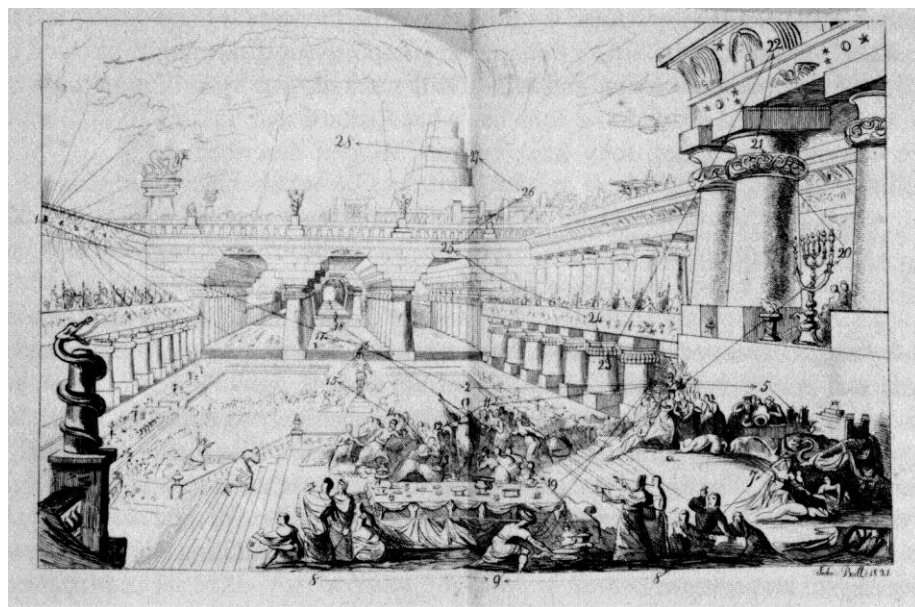


Figure 3.7. John Martin, *Diagram for Belshazzar's Feast*, from the pamphlet 'A Description of the Picture Belshazzar's Feast', etching, British Library, London.

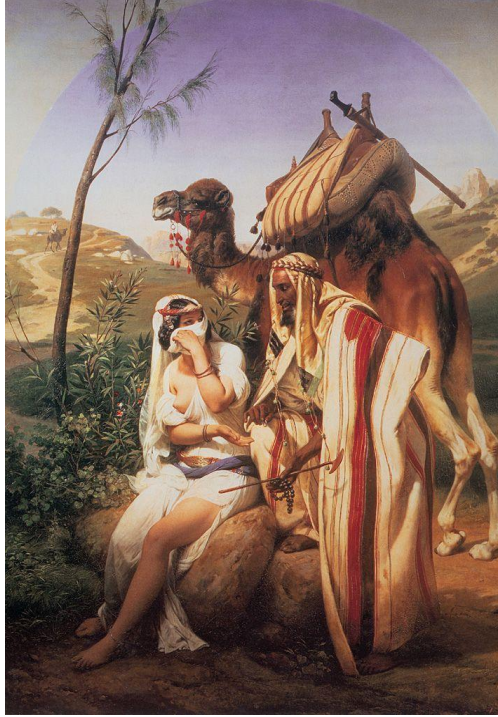


Figure 3.8. Horace Vernet, *Judah and Tamar*, 1840, Oil on canvas, 130 x 98 cm, Wallace Collection, London.



Figure 3.9. Rembrandt, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1636-8, Oil on canvas, 167 x 209 cm, National Gallery of Art, London.

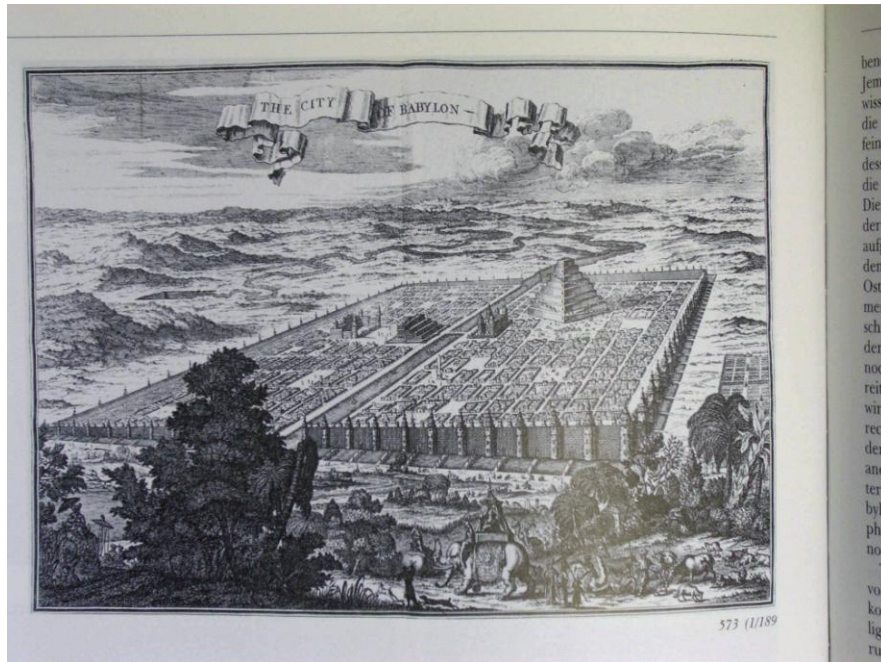


Figure 3.10. Engraved by Fletcher, *The City of Babylon*, 1740, engraving, 46 x 33 cm, Private Collection.

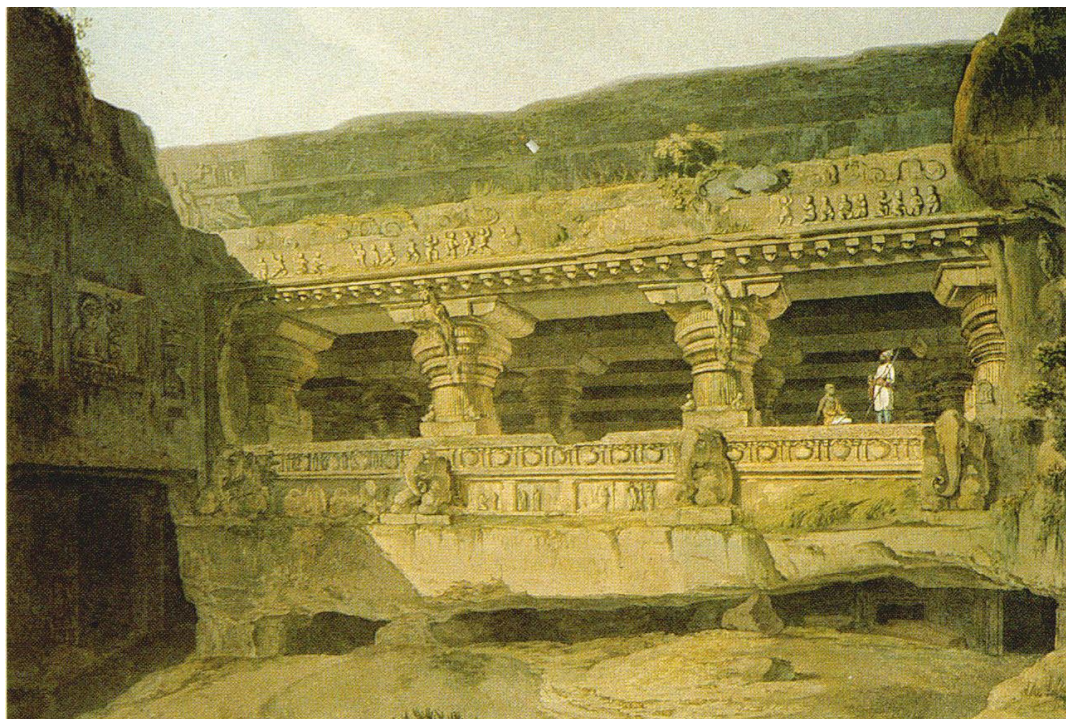


Figure 3.11. Thomas and William Daniell, *Jagannatha Sabha*, Plate 4 from *Hindoo excavations in the mountain of Ellora, near Aurungabad in the Deccan, in twenty-four views ...*, 1803, Aquatint, British Library, London.

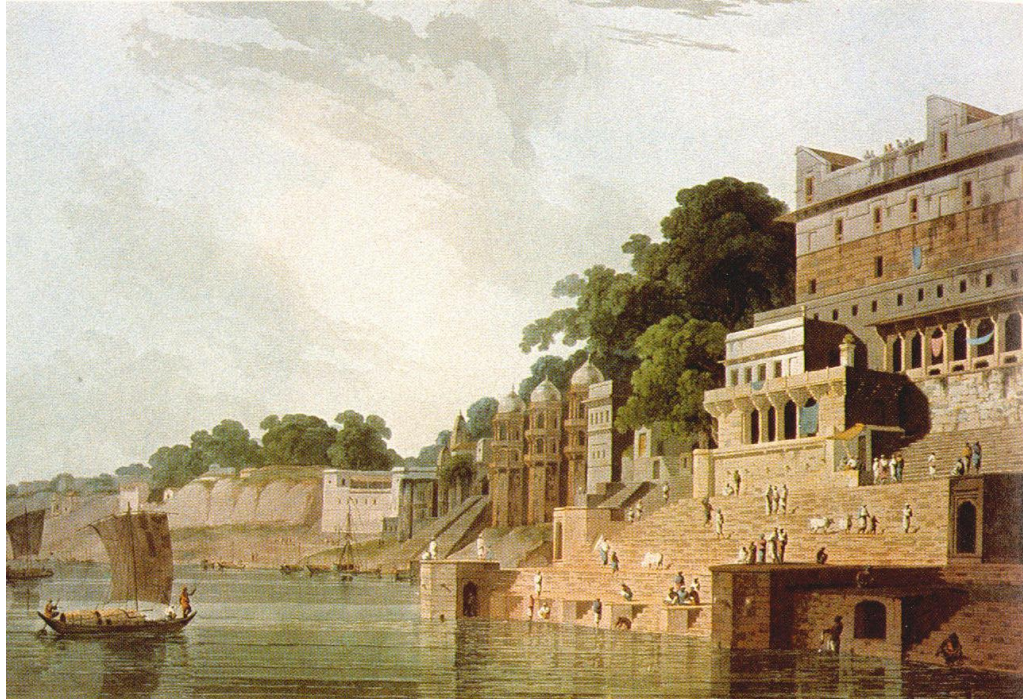


Figure 3.12. Daniells, *Dusasumade Gaut*, at Benares, on the Ganges, Part 1, Plate 16 of *Oriental Scenery*, 1795-97, Coloured aquatint, British Library, London.

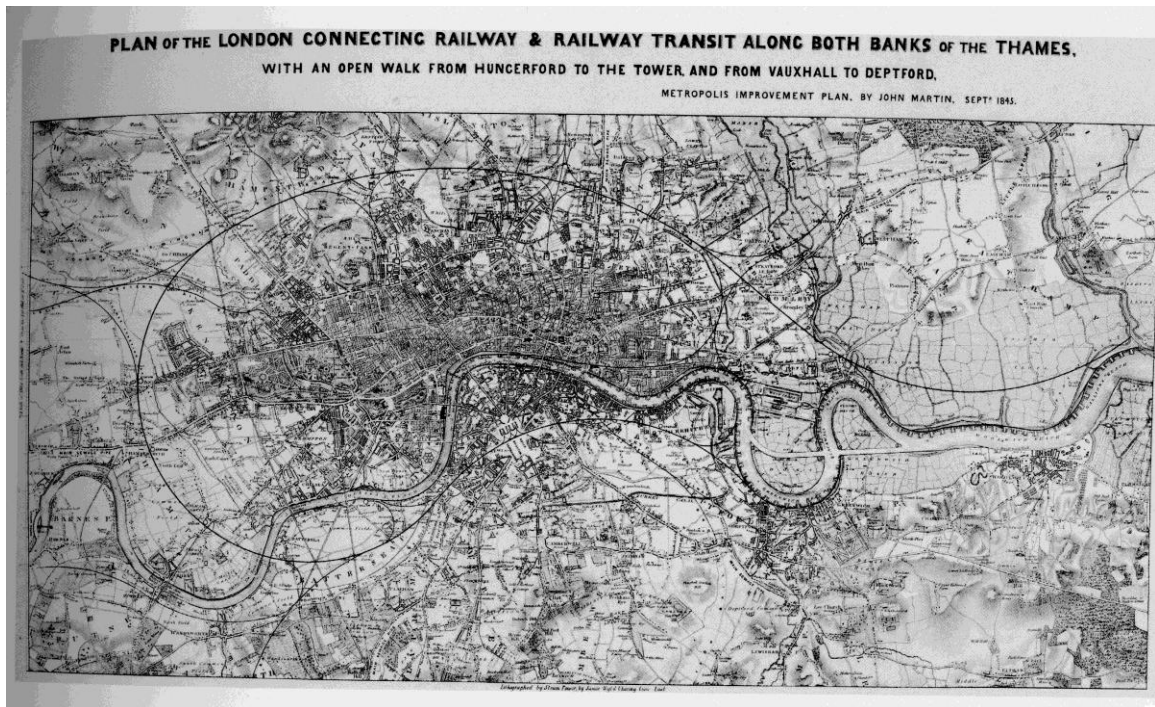


Figure 3.13. John Martin, *Plan of the London Connecting Railway & Railway Transit along both Banks of the Thames*, from 'Metropolitan Improvement Plans,' 1845, 54 x 86 cm, British Library, London.



Figure 4.1. Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1828, Oil on canvas, 392 x 496 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Figure 4.2. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (untraced original, Oil on canvas, 213 x 340 cm)



Figure 4.3. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828, preliminary etching, 62 x 96 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 4.4. John Martin, *The Fall of Babylon*, 1831, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (original painting untraced, 1819, Oil on canvas, 155 x 244 cm).



Figure 4.5. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821, Oil on canvas, 160 x 249 cm, Private Collection.



Figure 4.6. Anonymous, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1798, hand-coloured etching, 36 x 25 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 4.7. James Gillray, *The Hand-Writing on the Wall*, 1803, hand coloured etching with aquatint, 26 x 36 cm, British Museum, London.

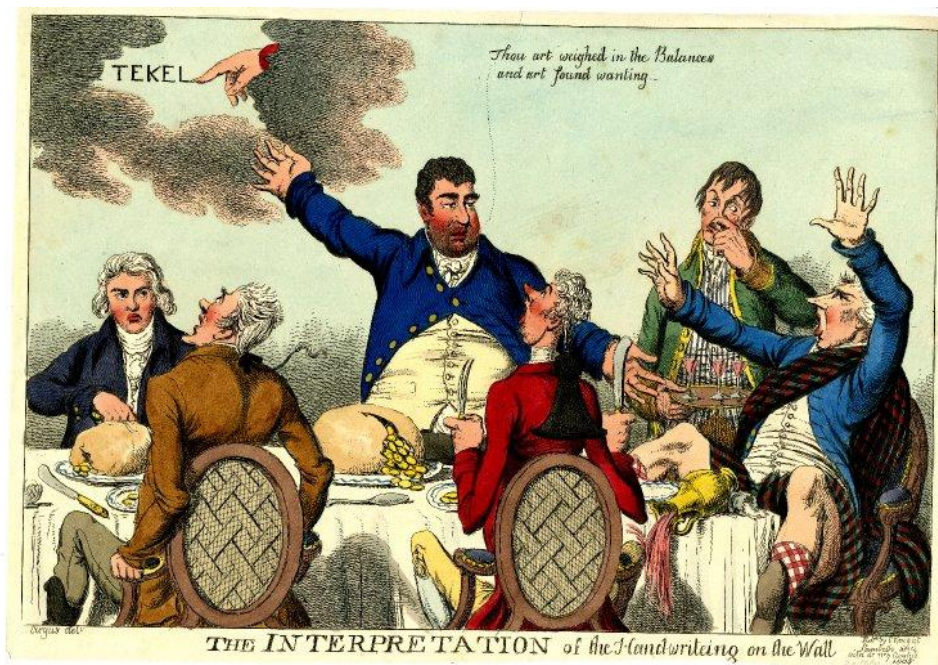


Figure 4.8. Charles Williams, *The Interpretation of the Handwriting on the Wall*, 1805, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.

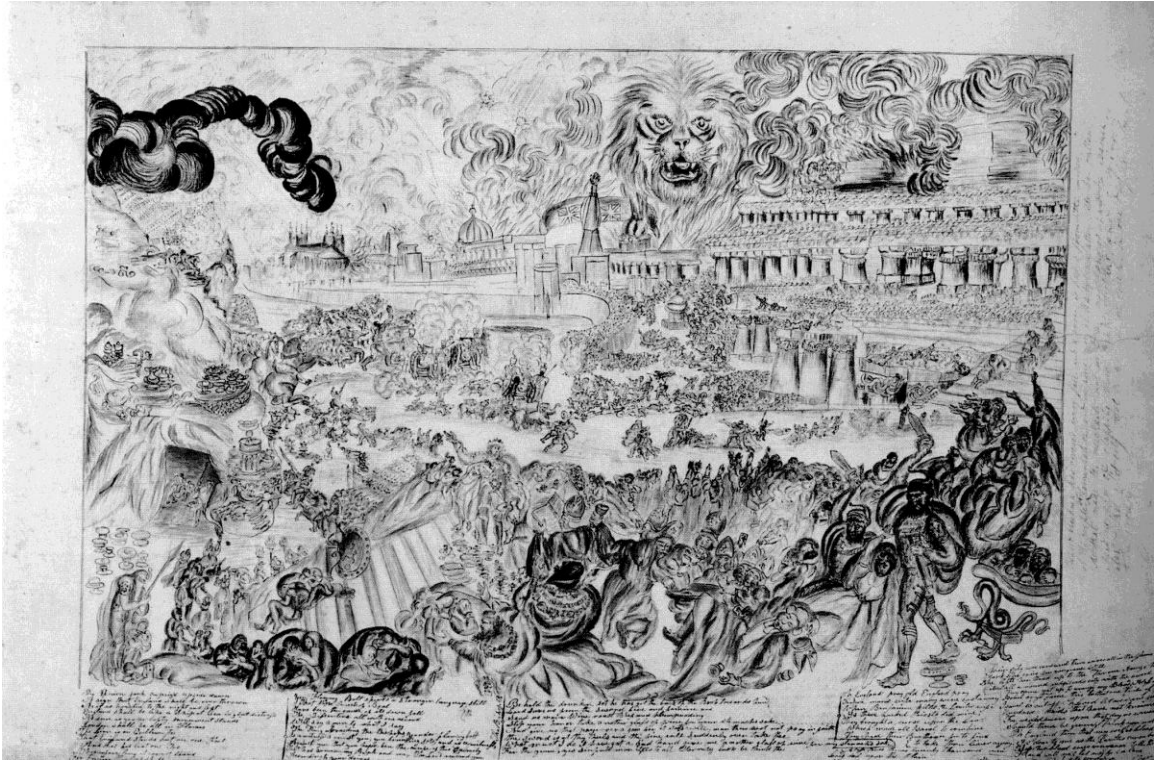


Figure 4.9. Jonathan Martin, *London's Overthrow*, 1832, Pen and ink on paper, 66 x 98 cm, Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum, London.



Figure 4.10. John Martin, *Satan Viewing the Ascent into Heaven*, from 'Illustrations to Paradise Lost', 1827, Mezzotint, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 4.11. John Martin, *Heaven-The Rivers of Bliss*, from 'Illustrations to Paradise Lost', 1825, Mezzotint, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.

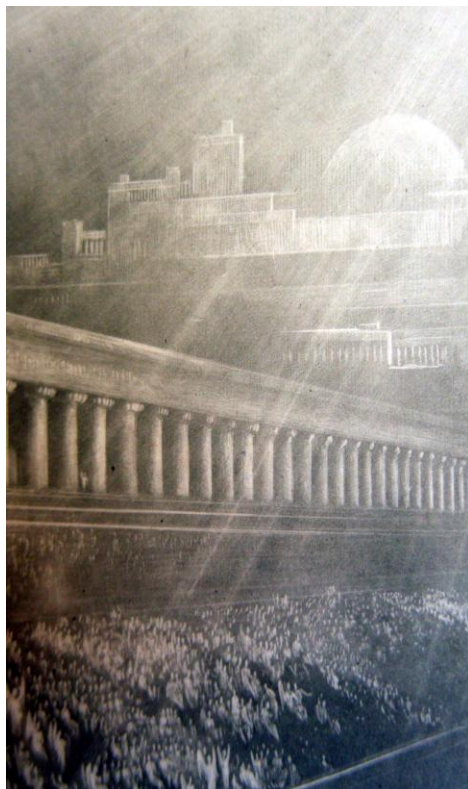


Figure 4.12. John Martin, *Heaven-Rivers of Bliss*, 1827 (detail).



Figure 4.13. John Martin, *The Celestial City and the River of Bliss*, 1841, Oil on canvas, 194 x 123 cm, Tate Britain, London.



Figure 4.14. John Martin, *The Celestial City and the River of Bliss*, 1841 (detail).



Figure 4.15. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 4.16. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 4.17. Washington Allston, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1843, Oil on canvas, 366 x 488 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts.



Figure 4.18. after John Slack, "A representation of the Manchester reform meeting dispersed by the civil and military power, Aug 16th 1819," 1819, wood engraving, 52 x 62, British Museum, London.



Figure 4.19. John Martin, *The Repentance of Nineveh*, 1840, Oil on board, 36 x 50 cm, Hatton Gallery, Newcastle-upon Tyne.



Figure 4.20. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 4.21. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail from mezzotint).



Figure 4.22. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828 (detail of etching).



Figure 4.23. Robert Cruikshank, *The Champion of Westminster Defending the People from Ministerial Imps and Reptiles*, 1818, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 39 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 4.24. Robert Cruikshank, *The Champion of Westminster Defending the People from Ministerial Imps and Reptiles*, 1818 (detail).

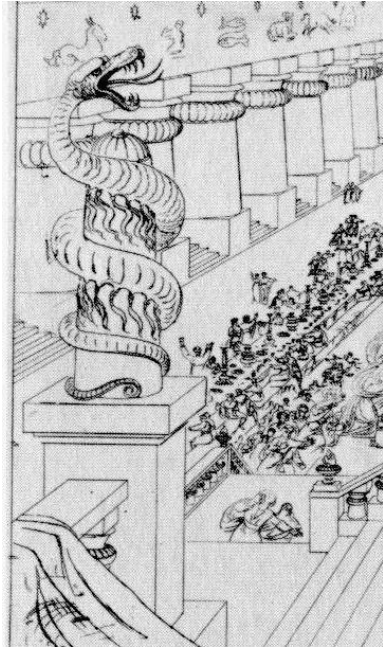


Figure 4.25. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail of etching).



Figure 4.26. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail of glass version at Syon House).



Figure 4.27. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821 (detail of glass version at Syon House).



Figure 4.28. John Martin, *The Fall of Babylon*, 1819 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 4.29. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828 (detail of mezzotint).

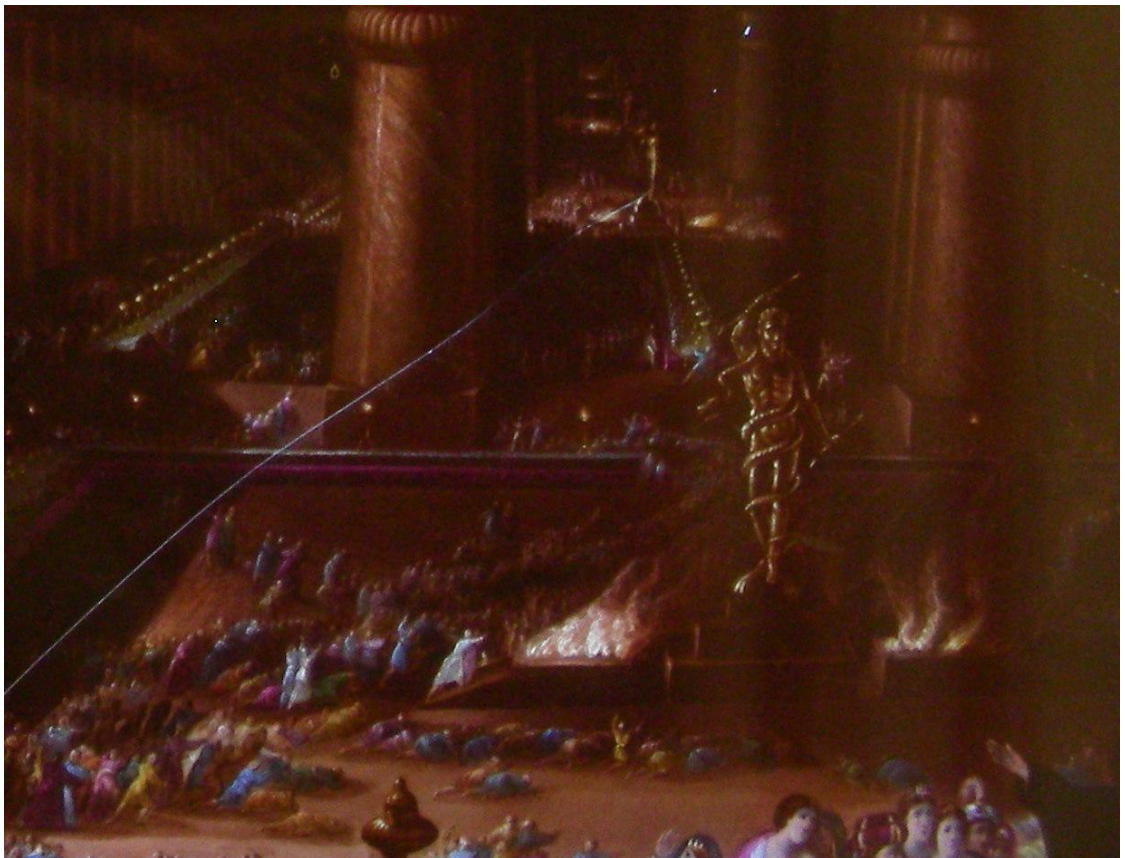


Figure 4.30. John Martin, *Belshazzar's Feast*, 1821, (detail of glass version at Syon House).



Figure 4.31. George Cruikshank, *A Patriot Luminary Extinguishing Noxious Gas!!!*, 1817, hand-coloured etching, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London.

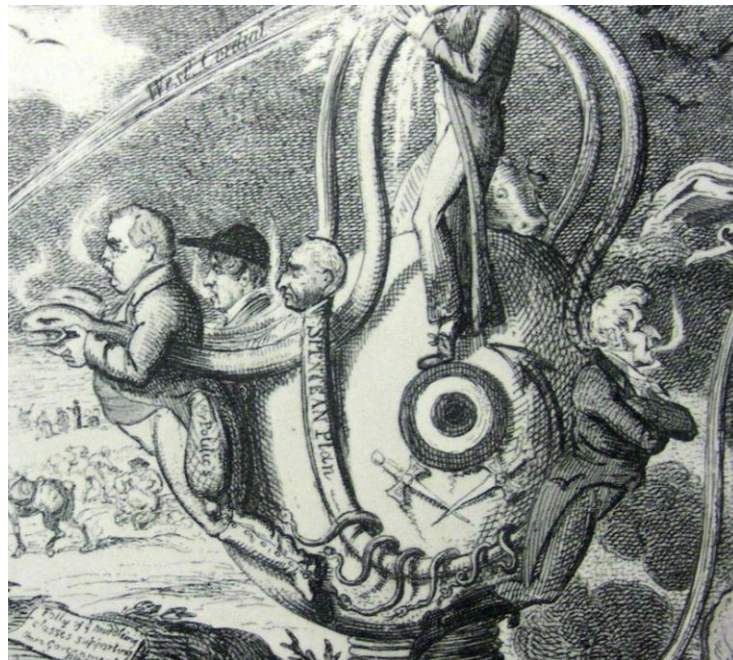


Figure 4.32. George Cruikshank, *A Patriot Luminary Extinguishing Noxious Gas!!!*, 1817 (detail).



Figure 4.33. A. Pugin, *Gallery of the British Institution*, from 'The Magazine of Fine Arts,' 1821, etching, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 4.34. A. Pugin, *Gallery of the British Institution*, from 'The Magazine of Fine Arts,' 1821 (detail).



Figure 5.1. J.M.W. Turner, *The Fifth Plague of Egypt*, 1800, Oil on canvas, 122 x 181 cm, Indianapolis Museum of Art.



Figure 5.2. John Martin, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, 1824, Oil on canvas, 144 x 214 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 5.3. David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt*, 1829, Oil on canvas, 119 x 212 cm, City of Birmingham Art Gallery, U.K.



Figure 5.4. David Roberts, study for *The Departure of the Israelites out of the Land of Egypt*, 1827, ink and watercolor on paper, 43 x 62 cm, British Museum, London.



Figure 5.5. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825, Oil on canvas, 149 x 240 cm, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, U.K..



Figure 5.6. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825, Mezzotint, Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT.



Figure 5.7. John Martin, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, 1823, preliminary sketch, 9 x 14 cm, Shepherd Gallery, New York



Figure 5.8. John Martin, *The Seventh Plague of Egypt*, 1824 (detail).

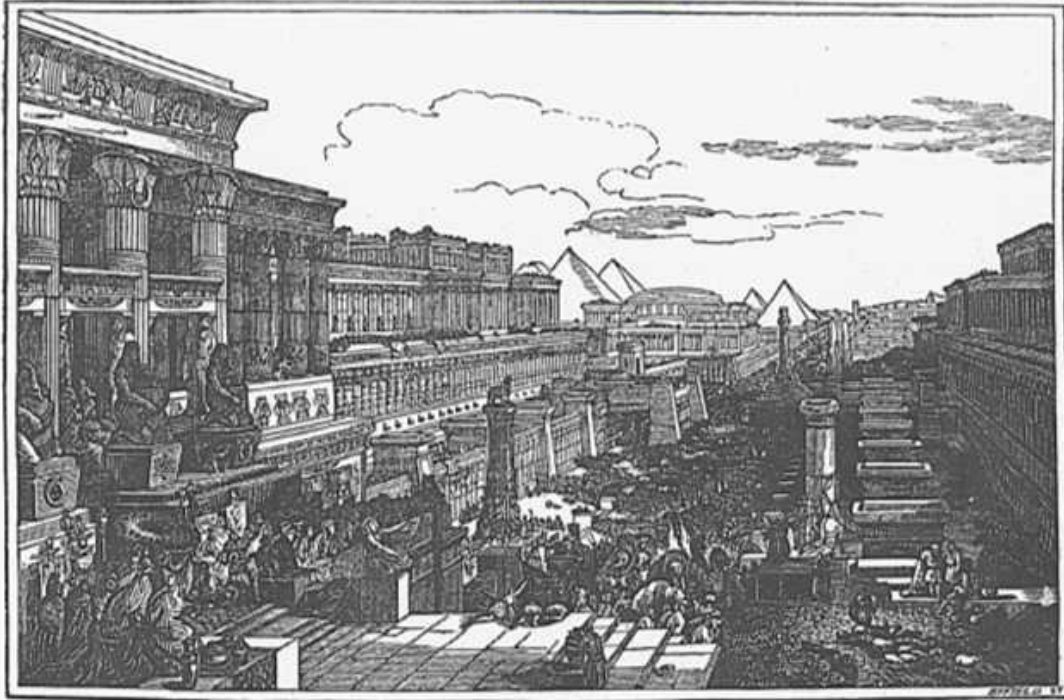


Figure 5.9. John Martin, *The Fall of Babylon*, 1831, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (untraced original, 1819, Oil on canvas, 155 x 244 cm).



Figure 5.10. John Martin, *The Fall of Nineveh*, 1828, mezzotint, 46 x 71 cm, British Museum, London (untraced original, Oil on canvas, 213 x 340 cm), .

THE
Saturday Magazine.
N^o. 5. SUPPLEMENT FOR JULY 28, 1832. { PRICE ONE PENNY
UNDER THE DIRECTION OF THE COMMITTEE OF GENERAL LITERATURE AND EDUCATION,
APPOINTED BY THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.
THE DEPARTURE OF THE ISRAELITES OUT OF EGYPT.



Copied, by permission, from the Print published by Messrs. Moon, Boys, and Graves

Figure 5.11. After David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt*, from 'The Saturday Magazine,' 1832, woodcut.

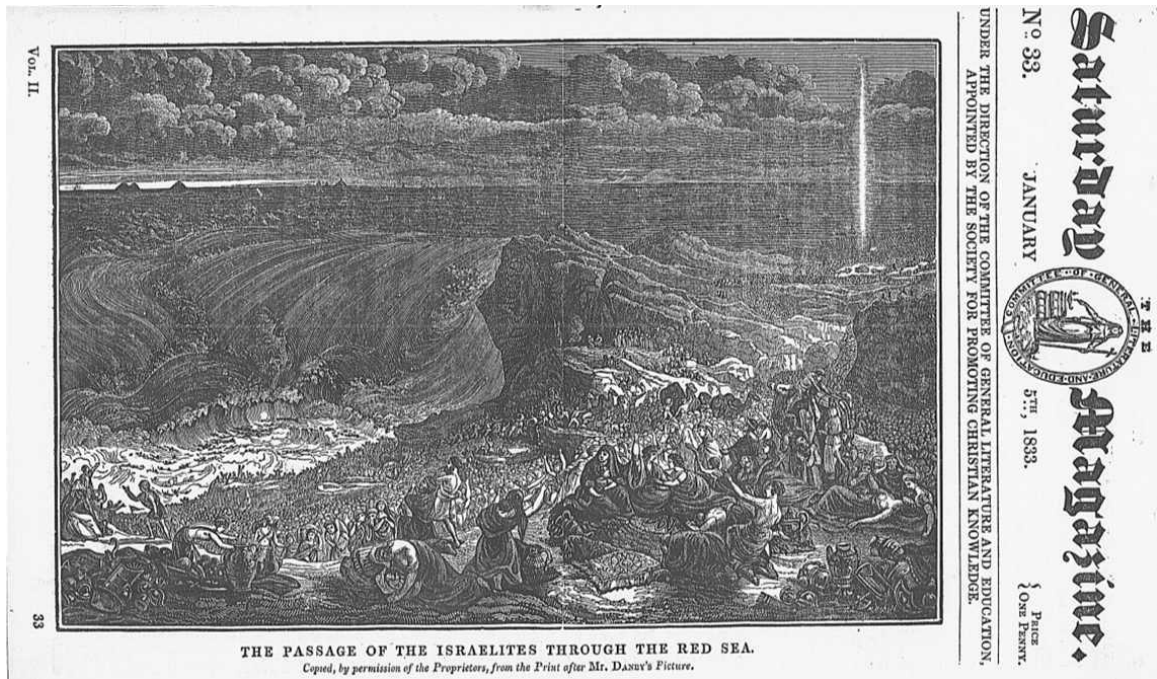


Figure 5.12. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, from 'The Saturday Magazine,' 1833, woodcut.



Figure 5.13. David Roberts, *The Departure of the Israelites out of Egypt*, 1829 (detail).



Figure 5.14. Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld, *The servitude and distress of the Israelites in Egypt*, from 'Die Bibel in Bildern', 1860, Etching.



Figure 5.15. Edward John Poynter, *Israel in Egypt*, 1867, Oil on canvas, 137 x 317 cm, Guildhall Art Gallery, London.

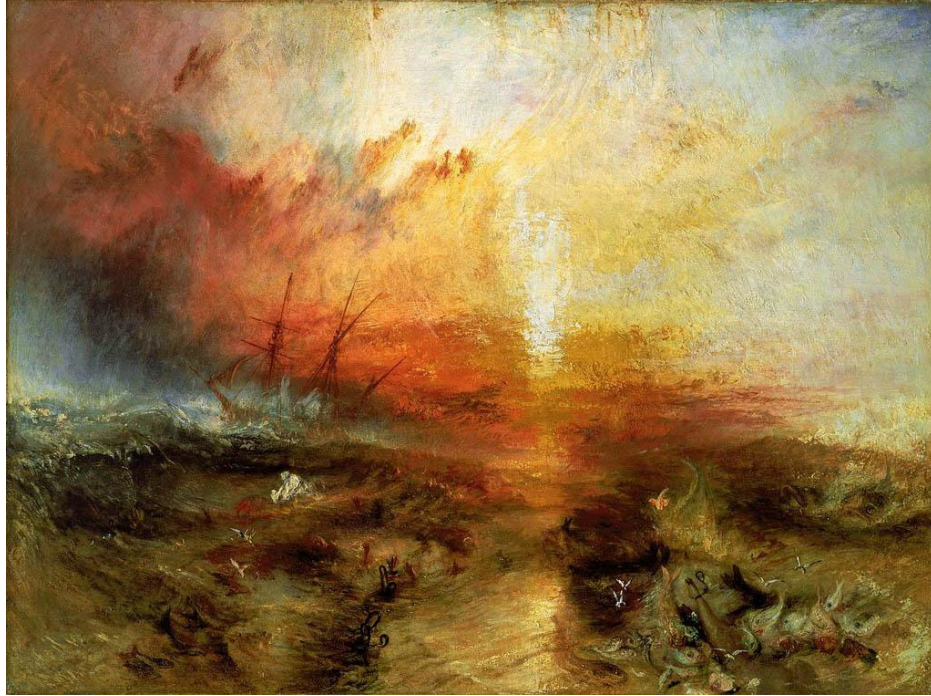


Figure 5.16. J. M. W. Turner, *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying*, 1840, Oil on canvas, 91 x 123 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 5.17. Eduard Bendemann, *The Captive Jews in Exile*, 1832, Oil on canvas, 183 x 280 cm, Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.



Figure 5.18. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 5.19. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 5.20. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 5.21. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 5.22. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).

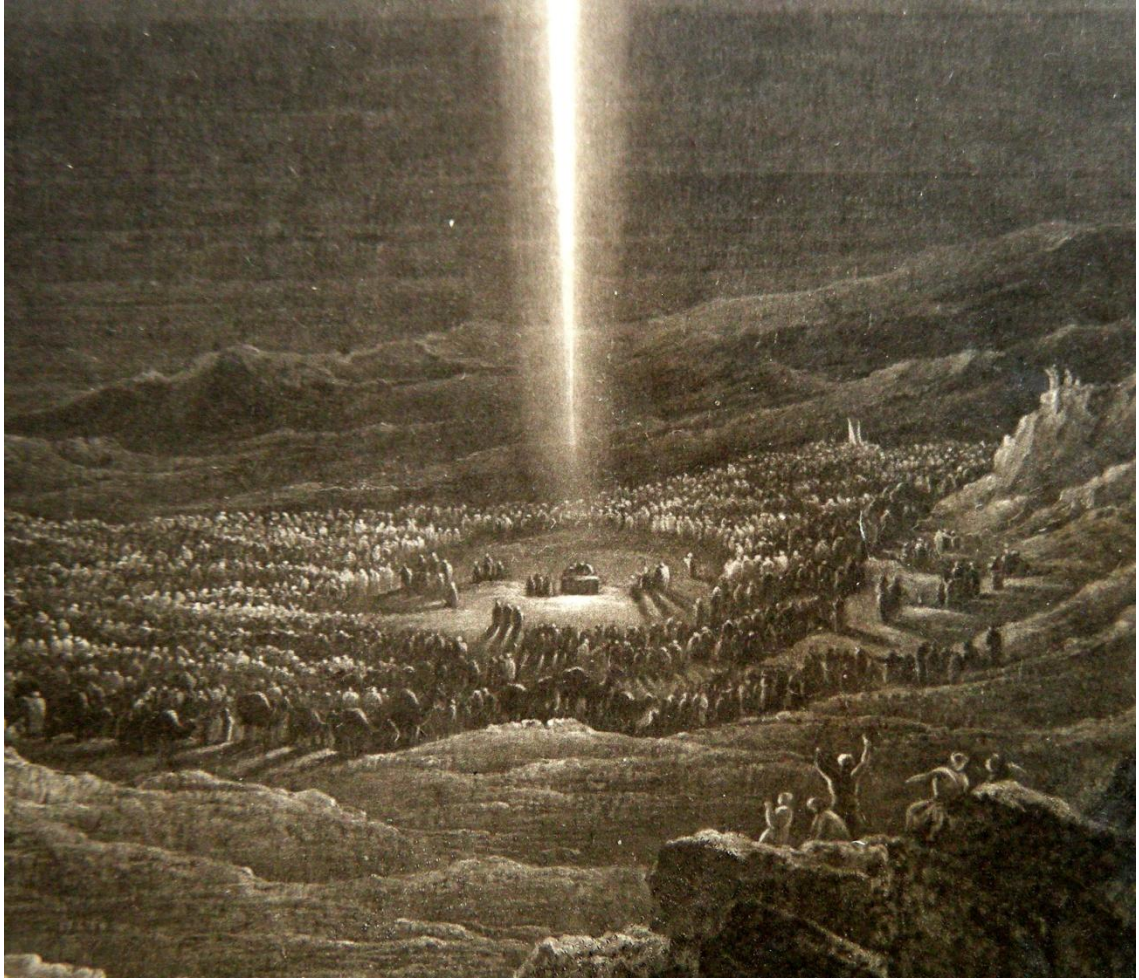


Figure 5.23. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 5.24. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail of mezzotint).



Figure 5.25. Francis Danby, Study for *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1823, sepia wash, 25 x 34 cm, Private Collection .



Figure 5.26. Poussin, *The Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert*, 1637-39, Oil on canvas, 149 x 200 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris .



Figure 5.27. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail).



Figure 5.28. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail).



Figure 5.29. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail).



Figure 5.30. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail).



Figure 5.31. Francis Danby, *The Delivery of Israel out of Egypt*, 1825 (detail).



Figure 6.1. Benjamin Franklin, *Proposed design for the Great Seal of the United States*, Drawing by Benson J. Lossing for Harper's New Monthly Magazine, July 1856. General Collections of the Library of Congress.



Figure 6.2. Henry Cheever Pratt (formerly attributed to Thomas Cole), *Moses on the Mount*, 1828-29, Oil on canvas, 117 x 150 cm, Shelburne Museum, Shelburne, Vermont.



Figure 6.3. John Martin, *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still*, 1816, Oil on canvas, 150 x 231 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Figure 6.4. John Martin, *Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still*, 1827 (detail from mezzotint).



Figure 6.5. John Martin, *The Creation of Light* from 'Illustrations to Paradise Lost,' 1825, Mezzotint, 25 x 35 cm, British Museum, London (Original untraced, 1825, Oil on canvas, 107 x 173 cm).

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