

# Michelangelo's Jews

## *The Treatment of Jews in Renaissance Rome and on the Sistine Chapel Ceiling*

By Chantal Sulkow

### Introduction

After the earliest stage of the cleaning of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling frescoes in the early 1980s, the lunettes depicting Christ's ancestors were the first to emerge from beneath centuries' worth of darkened layers of dirt. Michelangelo's brilliant use of color was not the only revelation; previously obscured details also came to light. One of these was an element of the costume worn by one of the ancestors, Aminadab. The cleaning revealed a yellow circle on his upper left arm. This circle was unmistakably recognizable as the Jewish badge or "signum," as it was called in Papal decrees and city statutes.<sup>1</sup>

According to the Bible, Aminadab was born during the Israelite exile in ancient Egypt. He was the father-in-law of Aaron, who was Moses's older brother and a leading prophet. It may well be asked: Why is he painted with a Renaissance-era signum on his arm? Jews had been made to wear such symbols in Michelangelo's time and for some centuries before that, but not back in the era of Aminadab and the Biblical ancestors. Michelangelo made studies of Aminadab that include this detail, so it is clear that the inclusion of the signum was intentional and planned. One of Michelangelo's sketchbooks has eight double-sided sheets in which a study of a man in the pose of Aminadab has a circle clearly inscribed upon his chest.<sup>2</sup>

The signum signified impurity and a demeaned status. Many Jews went to great lengths and paid large sums to avoid wearing the badge, though it was difficult to escape other degrading dress codes and sumptuary laws. Such laws, common in medieval and Renaissance Europe, controlled dress and other personal behavior.<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Aminadab's and other Sistine Chapel ancestors' clothing had the characteristics of sixteenth-century papal sumptuary laws assigned to the Roman Jewish community created for sixteenth-century viewers a sensation that the ancestors were, as one scholar has put it, "at the same time, the Jews of the Old Testament, those of then, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Wisch, "Vested Interest: Redressing Jews on Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling," *Artibus et Historiae* 24, no. 48 (2003): 143.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 145

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 145.

Jews of now.”<sup>4</sup> Time collapses upon itself: the fate of the Jews, in which their faith is subjugated and subsumed by Christian history, is mirrored in the Sistine ceiling’s reflection of contemporary Renaissance values. Sadly, these values included powerful anti-Semitic sentiments.

Our understanding of Aminadab functions as a reflection of the social influences and politics of Michelangelo’s world. Aminadab serves as a visual manifestation of the discrimination and persecution endured by the Jewish people of sixteenth-century Italy. Michelangelo’s representation of the Jewish people from the Old Testament, while not unusual when considered in the context of the era, contributed to a collective perception of Jewish “Otherness.” Jews were stereotyped as a nomadic race, “overcome by a great fatigue, their souls prey to the fears of the pursued, condemned as they (were) to continual wanderings.”<sup>5</sup>

The revelation of this signum speaks to two disparate but certainly related phenomenon, both of which will be covered in this paper. The first is how the Jews were treated in Renaissance Rome, in Michelangelo’s milieu. The second is how Michelangelo, likely with the help of theological advisers, portrayed the physical appearance of Jewish people on the Sistine Chapel ceiling (painted from 1508 to 1512). In an afterword, this paper will also look at a tangentially related subject: the possible influence of the Jewish Kabbalah on the program of the ceiling.

## **The status of the Jews in early sixteenth-century Rome**

### *Ritual humiliation and exclusion*

Before considering how Jews and Judaism are portrayed in the program of Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling, this paper will establish the landscape of Michelangelo’s world: notably, the status of Jews in fifteenth and early sixteenth-century Italy, and in Rome in particular. Why, one might ask, was a Jewish ancestor on the Sistine ceiling depicted wearing a signum? Such a badge is even more ominous today, since the Nazis made Jews wear yellow stars during the Holocaust.

Generally speaking, the Jewish community in Italy in the early sixteenth century was, like the Jewish communities of twentieth-century Europe, an endangered population. Anti-Semitism was a present, frightening, and violent reality. As a result of expulsions from numerous surrounding regions, from 1492 to 1511 there were five waves of Jewish immigration to Rome—from Spain, Sicily, Portugal, Navarra, Provence, Naples, Calabria,

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<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Careri, “Time of History and Time Out of History: The Sistine Chapel as ‘Theoretical Object’.” *Art History* 30, no. 3 (2007): 340.

<sup>5</sup> Charles De Tolnay, Michelangelo, II. The Sistine Chapel, (Princeton, 1969): quoted in Lisa Pon, “A Note on the Ancestors of Christ in the Sistine Chapel.” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 61 (1998): 30.

and Tripoli.<sup>6</sup>

Of the possible places a Jewish immigrant could settle in Italy, Rome was a relatively tolerant environment. The Jewish community in Rome, which had been established in the second century BCE, was the longest continuous community of its kind existing in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Records from 1527, the year of the Sack of Rome by the Visigoths, indicate that there were then close to 1,800 Jews in Rome (about 3 percent of the total population: approximately 55,000 before the Sack of Rome).<sup>8</sup> Roman Jews, commonly known as “The Pope’s Jews,” experienced an unusual status for this historical period. Christian humanists studied Hebrew texts with renowned Jewish scholars, and Jews served the Papal courts as financiers and physicians. By 1471, there were six synagogues in the city.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, Roman Jews were certainly not secure from persecution, nor were they considered the equals of Christians. Ironically, while Jewish theological knowledge and prophecy were believed to be invested with an ancient authority predating the Christian age, it was firmly believed that Jews would remain alienated from the promised blessing until, in the final days, they were converted.<sup>10</sup>

The status of the Jews in Rome is dramatically illustrated by the roles they were forced to play in two mass rituals. Carnival, traditionally a celebration of disorder and social reversal, depended on mandatory Jewish funding, which was the only official and consistent source of money for the events. By the middle of the fourteenth century, Jews paid a customary tax of 30 florins, representing the 30 pieces of silver paid to Judas for Jesus' betrayal. By the fifteenth century the tax was raised to 1,130 florins; there can be no mistake about the significance, for city statutes of 1464 identify that 1,100 was meant for the celebrations, 30 for the betrayal.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Carnival involved the forced participation and humiliation of Roman Jews. The Roman festival traditionally opened with “the foot-race of the Jews,” or the *palio degli ebrei*. As told by seventeenth-century Roman art historian Cassiano del Pozzo via his friend, the Jesuit scholar of Hebrew Giovanni Battista Ferrari, the streets were cold, wet, and muddy, and the Jews who were forced to participate did so in partial dress or completely naked. An entry from 1583 in the *Avvisi di Roma* (a Roman newspaper):

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<sup>6</sup> Moses A. Shulvass, “The Jewish Population in Renaissance Italy.” *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no. 1 (1951): 21.

<sup>7</sup> Nerida Newbigin and Barbara Wisch, *Acting on Faith: The Confraternity of the Gonfalone in Renaissance Rome* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2013), 363.

<sup>8</sup> Shulvass, “The Jewish Population,” 20.

<sup>9</sup> Wisch, “Vested Interest,” 152.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XVIII, XXVIII; Pat. Lat. 41:584; XX, XXIX-XXX, Pat. Lat. 41:704-07.

<sup>11</sup> Wisch, Vested Interest, 152.

. . . *i soliti otto ebrei corsero ignudi il pallio loro, favoriti di pioggia, vento e freddo, degni di questi perfidi mascherati di fango a dispetto delle grida. Dopo queste bestie bipedi correrano le quadrupedi.* (. . . the usual eight Jews ran their race naked, with rain, wind, and cold on their side, worthy of these evil traitors with masks of mud, in spite of the yelling. The quadrupeds ran after these two-legged beasts.)

Compounding the tortuous nature of the races, for the increased amusement of the crowd runners were often force-fed before the race so they would vomit and collapse. Spectators would throw mud and other items at the runners, a behavior otherwise reserved for prostitutes and adulteresses. Many runners never finished the race and collapsed from exhaustion; on some occasions they died *en route*.<sup>12</sup>

The second example of the ritualized anti-Semitism of Renaissance Italy was the annual Papal tradition of the *Sassaiola Santa*, or “Holy Shower of Stones.” This was a regulated annual stoning of the Jews on Good Friday. It was said to commemorate the holy Passion of Christ and to rebuke (Jewish) iniquity and obduracy. The *Sassaiola Santa* was carried out by a group that was sanctioned and monitored by the church. It was meant to be performed as play-acting, and in theory no serious damage was to come to any person or property. At one point in time, sticks and food had been thrown, but widespread famine discouraged food waste, and participants turned to stones. It was a situation that was bound to end badly; inevitably, the savage tradition escalated. In 1539 a full scale riot broke out, with fatal consequences.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to being subjected to these brutal rituals, Jews were only allowed to earn their livings in certain ways. In addition to medicine, moneylending was the major avenue for advancement.<sup>14</sup> Many Popes relied on Jewish merchant-bankers for important financial transactions.<sup>15</sup> For example, in 1497, when loans from Jewish bankers saved the city of Ancona from bankruptcy, Jews were able to leverage their lending power to exempt their wives from sumptuary laws.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Freedberg, David, “Cassiano on the Jewish Races,” in Cassiano Dal Pozzo's Paper Museum Vol. 2, edited by Ian Jenkins, 41-56. Milan: Olivetti, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> Newbiggin, *Acting on Faith*, 371. A similar example of an act of aggression performed as a regulated public ritual was a Roman mock auto-da-fé held in 1488, a time when Michelangelo was in the city and could have observed the event. In this instance, 230 Spanish Marranos—Jews who had been forced to convert to Christianity—confessed to practicing Judaism after their conversion and were then reconciled by the Pope in an “act of faith.” The Jews were made to wear conical hats and scapular garments with yellow crosses such as had been worn in Spain during inquisitions. Wisch, “Vested Interest,” 153.

<sup>14</sup> Although forced to charge less than Christian physicians, Jewish medical doctors were often better trained and considered more capable than their Christian counterparts. Though ecclesiastical regulations forbid it, the Popes tended to prefer and consult with Jewish doctors. Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 29

<sup>16</sup> Diane Owen Hughes, “Distinguishing Signs: Ear-Rings, Jews and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City.” *Past & Present* no. 112 (1986): 23.

Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, however, there was an organized effort to push Jews out of moneylending. This effort was championed by a group of Franciscan preachers. Christian-run pawn-broking institutions—*monte di pietá*—were to supplant the Jews. Depriving the Jews of their livelihood and means of survival was a sure way to force them out of the city. While Christians were prohibited from practicing usury (the practice of moneylending at unreasonably high interest rates), the *monte di pietá* was a workaround—organized by the Catholic Church and linked to charity, and so considered a lesser evil. Among the *monte*'s promoters was the Franciscan Bernardino da Feltre, who gave fiery sermons which at times led to near riots and vicious attacks on local Jews. In Florence, the Dominican friar and preacher Girolamo Savonarola contributed to the mounting anti-Semitism by preaching in support of the *monte* and Jewish expulsion.<sup>17</sup> Fortunato Coppedé of Perugia, who established the *monte* throughout Tuscany and Umbria, described the Jews as “truly wild and thirsty dogs that have sucked and go on sucking our blood” and who devour Christians “as rust devours iron.”<sup>18</sup>

Noble families such as the Medici supported the Jewish community; however, to alleviate hostile sentiment, the Medici publicly advocated for the establishment of the *monte di pietá* while quietly opposing Jewish expulsion and blocking the *monte*.<sup>19</sup> When the *monte* was finally put into effect in Florence at the end of 1494, Michelangelo was present in the city and would have felt the collective mood. By 1496, Jewish moneylending had, officially, ceased to exist in Florence.<sup>20</sup>

### *Identification as pariah*

Anti-Semitism escalated in Rome and Florence while Michelangelo was living and working in these cities, and laws requiring Jews to wear badges and follow sartorial codes were more strictly enforced as the sixteenth century began. But prior to Michelangelo's era, clothing had been used for centuries to identify the Jewish people. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 stated that Jews were to be distinguishable from the rest of the population by the nature of their clothes.<sup>21</sup> By 1257 in Rome, Jewish men were required to wear the circular yellow badge, and by 1360 a red tabard or short coat was required for men, and, for women, a red

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<sup>17</sup> Wisch, “Vested Interest,” 151.

<sup>18</sup> Hughes, “Distinguishing Signs,” 28.

<sup>19</sup> Dana E. Katz, *The Jew in the Art of the Italian Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008) 107.

<sup>20</sup> Wisch, “Vested Interest,” 151. The Jewish minority depended upon the Medicis for protection, and so the Jews' safety was unavoidably tied to the political stability of the regime. After Piero de' Medici II was overthrown in 1494, and the republic restored, first under the theocracy of Savonarola, it did not take long for the remaining Florentine Jews to be expelled from the city as well.

<sup>21</sup> Benjamin Ravid, “From Yellow to Red: On the Distinguishing Head-Covering of the Jews of Venice.” *Jewish History* 6, no. 1/2 (1992): 179.

overskirt.<sup>22</sup>

The Jews themselves had attempted to mitigate Christian hostility with their own self-imposed sumptuary laws. Concerned that they might attract attention and lose Papal protection if they dressed too well, they made an effort to conceal extravagances and blend in. In 1418, a Jewish commission met at Forlì to institute their own dress codes.<sup>23</sup>

The colors yellow and red had negative associations, being the distinguishing colors chosen for the dress codes of prostitutes in the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> In late fifteenth-century Rome, prostitutes were also being made to wear the same red overskirts as Jewish women, and many such parallels occurred throughout Europe.<sup>25</sup> Punishments for ignoring sartorial codes were also similar. In mid-fifteenth-century Viterbo, a town north of Rome, if a Jewish woman was found in public without her distinguishing veil, she could be stripped naked on the spot as punishment. In fourteenth-century Parma, the same penalty was assigned to prostitutes who strayed from the main square.<sup>26</sup> These parallels placed Jewish women outside the boundaries of respectable society, and certainly a major objective of the dress codes was to reduce and denigrate intermarriage between Christians and Jews.

Earrings were another distinguishing marker included in sumptuary codes for the Jews. In Exodus, a male Hebrew slave who refused freedom and chose to serve his master permanently is marked with a pierced ear. From 21:5-6:

But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.<sup>27</sup>

In fifteenth-century Rome, hoop earrings were required for all Jewish women over 10 years of age. They were meant as a counterpart to male circumcision.<sup>28</sup> Again, the same

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<sup>22</sup> Wisch, "Vested Interest," 148; Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," 18. The Venetian Senate legislation of 1394 followed similar guidelines when they ruled that all Jews were required to wear on their chests "a clearly visible yellow circle the size of a loaf of bread or roll costing 4 denarii". Bonfil, *Jewish Life*, 244. The reason for the circular shape of the Jewish badge is unknown. There were many shape variations that occurred throughout the Christian world. Naturally, we are reminded of Jews in the Holocaust being made to wear yellow stars, but in this earlier period the circle remained the most common. It may have signified a coin, marking Jews as usurers, accomplices of Judas Iscariot. The circle also could have indicated the host and its desecration, another charge frequently directed at the Jews. Many professional organizations and confraternities wore badges, so the stigma was not in the wearing of a badge alone; the Jewish signum in particular represented a mark of Cain, to whom Pope Innocent III had directly compared the Jews. Wisch, "Vested Interest," 147.

<sup>23</sup> Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," 26.

<sup>24</sup> Bonfil, *Jewish Life*, 244.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," 30.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>27</sup> Wisch, "Vested Interest," 161.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 148.

requirement was imposed on prostitutes, and hoops were also worn by other marginalized people such as Moors and gypsies. Attempting to avoid implications of immorality, Jewish women went to great lengths to avoid wearing earrings. As noted earlier, in Ancona Jewish bankers gained permission for their wives to be exempted from sumptuary laws and remove their earrings.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, given that the Sistine Chapel, in its portrayal of the ancestors, speaks of Jewish history and offers a vision of who the Jews were both in sixteenth-century Rome and long before Christ, it is also worth noting that, in Renaissance Italy, Jews had limited opportunities to present visually and publicly their history or their visions of themselves. Jewish historiography was scarce and produced minimally, when compared to popular works produced by non-Jews. No works that can be characterized as serious Jewish historical writing were printed more than once, if at all, and those volumes that did reach print appear not to have circulated widely outside the Jewish communities.<sup>30</sup> Christian historians and artists in Renaissance society controlled the historical record that appeared in the art of churches and cathedrals. The visual narrative of who the Jewish people were, how they lived, and what they looked like was dictated by the Christian perspective. Michelangelo's statue of Moses with horns (a statue commissioned by Pope Julius II for his tomb) is only one of the many distinctly non-Jewish presentations of what a Biblical Jewish figure looked like. The larger effect of this limited and biased interpretation of who Jews were and what they looked like is the lasting demonization of the race.

## **The Portrayal of Jews on the Ceiling**

### *Setting the stage*

Having set the scene, let us now return to the frescoes of the Chapel ceiling. We may make an immediate connection with the dress codes just discussed, with the role of earrings in the sumptuary laws. On the ceiling, Aminadab's Jewishness—and what we might call his sixteenth-century Jewishness, despite the fact that he is an Old Testament figure—is purposefully marked twice over, both by the signum and by the fact that he is the only male figure shown wearing earrings. He is anachronic, bearing characteristics that belong to disparate periods.

Given the previous discussion of how Jews had to wear yellow badges and red clothing, it is noteworthy that yellow and red are conspicuously and repeatedly present in the

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<sup>29</sup> Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs," 23. In the sixteenth century the status of the earring changed again. The hoop earring designated as a marker for Jewish women became differentiated from the pendant or drop earring which was adopted by the Christian community. Ibid., 45. In Lorenzo Lotto's 1523 version of *The Mystic Marriage of St. Catherine*, the saint demonstrates the change in fashion and wears earrings, but in the Christian drop pendant style.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Bonfil, "How Golden Was the Age of the Renaissance in Jewish Historiography?" *History & Theory* 27, no. 4 (1988): 86.

costume of every ancestor in the Chapel's lunettes, and may also be seen in many of the spandrels. Next to the final lunette (marked "Jacob and Joseph"), there is a woman who is commonly thought to be Mary. Her shoulder bears an unmistakable shade of virginal blue. It has been proposed that this not only recalls the incarnation, but also indicates her new alliance, casting off her Jewish identity for Christian faith. She looks directly outward and meets the viewer's gaze, which no other ancestor in the lunette series does.<sup>31</sup>

More generally, understanding Aminadab's place in the larger context of the ceiling depends on an understanding of the meanings of the lunettes and of the interpenetrating vaults, which represent the generations, or ancestors, of Christ. Unfortunately, the lunette cycle, full of illogicalities, has caused confusion and speculation.<sup>32</sup> The names come from Matthew 1:1-16, "The Genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham . . ."

The tablets on each of the fourteen extant lunettes establishes a timeline of these names, these ancestors, from the altar to the entrance wall, but there are problems with this.<sup>33</sup> To follow the correct biblical order, the tablets should be read in pairs, beginning with the two on the altar wall, then skipping back and forth across the Chapel within each bay. Yet, the relation of the names to the figures is inconsistent, assuming the names are meant to

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<sup>31</sup> Careri, "Time of History," 342. The baby, who is barely visible and relegated to the shadows behind her, would have to be Jesus. He is accepting a loaf of bread from an older child, likely St. John the Baptist, prefiguring the sacrifice on the cross. This refers to the belief that the bread and wine of the Eucharist are truly the body and blood of Christ. One can imagine, looking at Mary's knowing gaze, that pushing this depiction of the Holy Family to a corner of the Chapel may have even been a joke of Michelangelo's. Also, the obvious carnality of the generations having reproduced over the ages contrasts with the Immaculate Conception; while the Virgin's ancestors were conceived in sin in the earthly realm, Mary and Christ alone were conceived in grace. Kim E. Butler, "The Immaculate Body in the Sistine Ceiling," *Art History* 32, no. 2 (2009): 257.

<sup>32</sup> A precedent for the ancestor theme does exist in the *Tree of Jesse*. This is a traditional depiction in art of the ancestors of Christ in which a tree is shown as having risen from Jesse of Bethlehem, the father of King David. The *Tree of Jesse* is also the origin of the use of the "family tree" as a schematic genealogical representation. Wind suggests this could have been part of the original Sistine ceiling plan and was transferred to the sides to make more room for the Creation story. An interesting similarity exists between two of Michelangelo's early architectural study drawings for the Sistine project and the *Tree of Jesse* design of the ceiling of St. Mary's Cathedral in Hildesheim, Germany. Additionally, the forebears of Christ were a customary theme of sermons given at feasts of the Virgin. Some of these were available in print in Michelangelo's time and so could have been a reference point. Wind, "Sante Pagnini," 14-15.

Another possible influence could have been Joachim of Flora, who illustrated "The Concords of Persons," matching seven ancestors with seven biblical figures and popes. Some of his concords (or pairings, combinations) line up with Michelangelo's. For example, Joachim paired Adam and Ozias, who were linked by their defining events: Adam was driven out of paradise while Ozias was driven out of the temple for his sins. (This punishment reflected a belief that the Jewish people should be driven out of the holy place for their offences.) One pairing of Joachim's that was also used on the Sistine ceiling is of Zorobabel, who led his people out of Babylonian enslavement to rebuild the temple, with Noah, who led his people through the flood by building the ark. Malcolm Bull, "The Iconography of the Sistine Chapel Ceiling," *The Burlington Magazine* 130, no. 1025 (1988): 599.

<sup>33</sup> Two of the lunettes that were originally on the altar wall have been destroyed. There were to have been sixteen in total. Esther Gordon Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Part I," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 2 (1979): 227.



serve as labels.<sup>34</sup> Another source of confusion is that many of the lunette names do not have corresponding historical accounts in the Bible.<sup>35</sup>

Adding to the mystery, Michelangelo's handling of the theme of the ancestors of Christ is unconventional. Not only are the mostly anonymous female figures given equal representation, but many important male figures who should possess recognizable attributes—people such as King David and King Solomon—bear no identifying signifiers or iconography.<sup>36</sup>

### *Specifics of the portrayal*

Let us look more closely at how Michelangelo portrays the ancestors. The Old Testament tells us that, along with being Aaron's father-in-law, Aminadab was the head of a Levite family who transported the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. He was only six generations removed from Abraham. He was not ascribed a deceitful or untrustworthy personality, yet in the lunette he is portrayed as a strange, unhappy figure.<sup>37</sup> His hands are crossed, something commonly seen in depictions of bound captives on Roman triumphal monuments. He also wears a grimace, which was a facial expression traditionally associated with negative stereotypes of Jews in art and literature.<sup>38</sup> (An example of the recurring characterization of the physical ugliness ascribed to Jewish people is plainly apparent in many portrayals of Judas Iscariot, the twelfth apostle and traitorous Jew who notoriously betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. This trope is remarked upon by Susan Gubar, a professor of English and Women's Studies, when she cites the tendency of depictions of Judas to show him with a "hook nose, blind eyes or (in profile) one suspicious eye . . . and a malevolent mouth."<sup>39</sup>)

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<sup>34</sup> Esther Gordon Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling, Part II," *The Art Bulletin* 61, no. 3 (1979): 418. Attempts have been made at explanations; none have been satisfying. Dotson proposes that the lunette names might have prophetic meanings and relate to the narrative scenes at the center, but it is not, or not yet, clear how. Edgar Wind attempts to follow a code of translating Hebrew names to Latin and then ascribing a vice and virtue to each. Edgar Wind, "Sante Pagnini and Michelangelo: A Study of the Succession of Savonarola," in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 26 (1944): 211-46, rpt in Michelangelo, *Selected Scholarship in English*, ed. William Wallace (Hamden, CT: Garland, 1995), 18. Taylor argues that Michelangelo simply miscalculated and made a mistake. Considering the enormity of the Sistine project and the advanced planning that must have been involved, this possibility is highly unlikely. Paul Taylor, "Michelangelo's Mistakes in the Generation of Christ," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 67 (2004): 286. In 1969, de Tolnay referred to the lunettes as having the appearance of "the sphere of shadow and death," but this analysis has suffered since the cleaning of the ceiling revealed such bright and vibrant coloring. De Tolnay, as quoted in Pon, 255.

<sup>35</sup> Wind, Sante Pagnini, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Wisch, "Vested Interest," 143.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>39</sup> Gubar, Susan. *Judas: A Biography*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 8.

Yet the Aminadab lunette is prominently placed above the Papal throne. He is unusual in that he is one of two ancestors who comes with a tablet with only one name, and he is depicted without children. A clue may be in the adjoining *Punishment of Haman*, the pendentive (portion of the vault) directly above Aminadab.<sup>40</sup> This depicts the story of the Book of Esther, and conservators have confirmed that this pendentive was painted directly prior to the painting of the Aminadab lunette.<sup>41</sup> The story of Esther is one of hidden ethnicity and intermarriage, in which Jews gain power through pretense. The badge being present on the adjoining lunette could refer to one of the badge's practical purposes: preventing such subterfuge; preventing, in particular, intermarriage between Christians and Jews.<sup>42</sup>

Another coinciding image located directly below the lunette is of Pope Evaristus, the only pope to have Jewish origins inscribed and recorded in the Chapel. Further below Evaristus, as part of the Moses cycle, there is a fresco depicting circumcision.<sup>43</sup>

If we consider Aminadab in the context of the entire ancestor cycle, we find that, as a group, the series of Christ's distant relatives is unsettling. Edgar Wind, a German-born art historian, has described Christ's forbears on the Chapel ceiling as having "weird and pathetic features, occasionally verging on the grotesque." The representations in the lunettes and in the triangular interpenetrating vaults—though, in particular, in the lunettes—are remarkably negative, and strikingly different in character from the Genesis scenes in the ceiling's center. Wind, who specialized in Renaissance iconology, suggests that the ancestors may have been intended to function as equals to the common worshipper, bridging a gap between the ceiling and the viewer, the pure and the impure, encouraging a kinship or familiarity.<sup>44</sup> Some of the family scenes may even be read as impressions of Michelangelo's experience with the domestic life of the Tuscan middle class.<sup>45</sup>

Michelangelo's ancestors are the very definition of the anti-heroic.<sup>46</sup> By contrast, the groups in the spandrels are active and on a journey, perhaps seeking the City of God.

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<sup>40</sup> A pendentive is the portion of a vault by means of which the square space in the middle of a building is brought to an octagon or circle to receive a cupola.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>44</sup> Wind, "Sante Pagnini," 11. See also Hungarian art historian and Michelangelo expert Charles de Tolnay, *Michelangelo: Sculptor, Painter, Architect* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975), 30. De Tolnay writes of "a vision of the prehistoric life of man multiplying itself unconsciously in an infinite series of generations."

<sup>45</sup> Wilde, Johannes, "Michelangelo: Six Lectures." *Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press*, (1978): 73.

<sup>46</sup> Giovanni Careri, an art historian based in Paris and Lyon, describes the ancestors as being "situated at the limits of a history of salvation" and as "thresholds to the time of Christian history." Giovanni Careri, "Time of History and Time Out of History: The Sistine Chapel as 'Theoretical Object'." *Art History* 30, no. 3 (2007): 339.

Turning toward one another, they display intimacy, warmth, and affection. But the ancestors and their families in the lunettes are limited, static, and enclosed in interior spaces; they seem suspicious and frightened.<sup>47</sup> They are physically divided not only by the windows that interrupt the pictorial fields; they lack the warmth of interpersonal connections. Self-absorbed, they turn physically away from one another. They embody the human condition and the condition of humans in the Middle East long ago—people ignorant of the coming of Christ, immersed in a fog of monotony as they blindly await the Last Judgment and the end of time. Their melancholic attitudes demonstrate postures and occupations similar to the iconography of the sin sloth.<sup>48</sup> Some display a slothful vanity: the woman in the Naason lunette gazes at herself in a mirror, and Aminadab's companion lethargically combs her hair. Even stranger is the man in what is called the Salmon, Booz, and Obeth group. This man demonstrates signs of possible madness as he confronts a head carved in his own likeness at the top of a walking stick.<sup>49</sup>

Portrayed as people caught up in mundane everyday life, people who indulge in vices and deviant behavior, these characters are marginalized figuratively from the main stage of Christian history and literally pushed to the sides of the Chapel walls. In a hierarchical sense, the characters portrayed in the lunettes are on the low level of un-enlightenment. The characters pictured as pursuing the City of God, or salvation, are positioned above.<sup>50</sup> The families in the triangular spandrel frescoes are outside in nature. They appear to be on a pilgrimage, emulating the Holy Family on the flight into Egypt (Matthew 2:13-23).

## Conclusion

Heinrich Graetz—a nineteenth-century scholar, one of the first to write a comprehensive history of the Jewish people from a Jewish perspective—has said that Christian historiography denies Judaism any history, in the noble sense of the term.<sup>51</sup> This begs the question: Who gets to decide what is noble, and what guarantees that this decision will be just, or fair? The voices of the powerful are always the loudest. If, as it has often been said, history is written by the winners, in too many scenarios we are certainly missing the objective truth; at the very least, we are lacking a side to the story.

And who is Aminadab in all of this? He is the other side of the story; he functions as a document of social history. He is an undeniable visual truth in the midst of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, which is considered to be one of the greatest achievements in the

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<sup>47</sup> Dotson, Part I, 228.

<sup>48</sup> Careri, *Time of History*, 328.

<sup>49</sup> Dotson, Part I, 228.

<sup>50</sup> Dotson, "An Augustinian Interpretation," Part I, 230. As regards the City of God, and Augustine's text that goes by that name in English, see the afterword on the Kabballah.

<sup>51</sup> Corrado Vivanti, "The History of the Jews in Italy and the History of Italy." *The Journal of Modern History* 67 no. 2 (1995): 309.

history of Western art. He is an afterthought in a work of renowned brilliance, yet the mark on his arm carries the weight of the tragedy of an entire race. He is, in a sense, timeless; he is a document of the Jewish experience at the precise moment in history when Michelangelo was struggling to paint a chapel ceiling for a demanding Pope. A representative of the Jews of the Old Testament and the Jews of sixteenth-century Rome, as well as those of the twentieth century after the rise and fall of Nazism and the horrors of the Holocaust, Aminadab carries a message of Jewish identity throughout time.

## Afterword

### *The Possible Role of the Kabbalah in the Ceiling Program*

It is thought that Michelangelo must have had advisers helping him plan the program for the ceiling. Scholars have proposed various people as candidates for having played an advisory role, but no concrete evidence has been found, nor have written plans for the ceiling paintings been found. Therefore, interpretations of the sources of the iconography come principally from the paintings themselves. One prominent theory is that the iconography was influenced by Augustine's imposing work *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos* (The City of God Against the Pagans; a.k.a. The City of God). For example, in Augustine's text, history begins with the first acts of Creation and concludes at the end of time. This is much like the Creation-to-Last-Judgement trajectory of the Sistine ceiling.<sup>52</sup>

I will make a case below for the influence of Jewish Kabbalistic thought and Jewish mythology. It is notable, too, that the Kabbalah is strongly dualistic, as was Augustine's thinking. Augustine divides the history of God's people into two cities arising from two disparate classes of angels: "For from (Adam) were to come all men, some of them to join the company of the evil angels in their punishment, others to be admitted to the company of the good angels in their reward."<sup>53</sup> In *The City of God*, Jew and Gentile represent the two walls of the structure of the church, with Christ as its cornerstone.<sup>54</sup> It may well be that, beyond or above specific suggestions of Augustine's writing or from the Kabbalah, it was dualism—on a simple level, the struggle of good versus evil—that most informed Michelangelo's work, and perhaps gave him a simple plot to organize his work and guide viewers' experience of it.

Kabbalah was a popular topic of study among Christian Renaissance intellectuals and Neoplatonists in Michelangelo's circles. For example, one of the possible advisers to Michelangelo is Egidio da Viterbo, who, in addition to being an enthusiastic ecclesiastical

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<sup>52</sup> Dotson, Part I, 223.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 224.

reformer, an eloquent orator, poet, and philosopher, was a student of the Kabbalah.<sup>55</sup> While living at the Medici family palazzo from 1490 to 1492, Michelangelo was exposed to an array of scholars and philosophers, including members of the Platonic Academy, an organization in which Christian speculation about the Kabbalah flourished.<sup>56</sup> At the Medici household, Michelangelo is likely to have encountered one of the foremost Christian Kabbalists of the time, Pico della Mirandola.<sup>57</sup>

The word “Kabbalah,” which means both “tradition” and “reception,” refers to a collection of mystical books that are said to have been handed down from the angels to Adam, from God to Moses, or from Enoch to his descendants. Before they were transcribed, these books were communicated orally, for example, from rabbis to their pupils.<sup>58</sup> Kabbalah differs from traditional Judaism in the belief that God has a dual nature: that of the knowable and unknowable God, and including male and female elements. Kabbalah also conceptualizes the body of the Lord as a tree which combines a right side—this being the male, active aspect—with a left side, which is characterized as female, passive, and even evil. This dualism suggests that because God encompasses all elements positive and negative, light and dark, good and evil alike.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, for example, the Sistine Genesis scene depicting *The Temptation and Expulsion* can be read as showing an “evil” nature emerging from the female left side. A female half-human serpent tempts Adam and Eve from the left side of the tree of knowledge, offering the forbidden fruit from her left hand.<sup>60</sup> The serpent may well be a version of the Jewish mythological character Lilith, a female demon or night hag who in Jewish folklore was Adam’s first wife and was created at the same time and from the same earth as Adam.

Also on the ceiling, in *The Creation of Eve* painting, Eve emerges from the left side of Adam’s body and appears to stumble as she steps toward God. It has been suggested that Michelangelo is making a pun on the Hebrew word for rib, *tsela*, which also means “a stumbling.”<sup>61</sup> It is worth noting that, in this case, if Michelangelo had intended to follow the

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<sup>55</sup> Bull, “Iconography,” 604.

<sup>56</sup> Jane Schuyler, “The Left Side of God: A Reflection of Cabala in Michelangelo’s Genesis Scenes,” *Notes in the History of Art* 6, no. 1 (1986): 13.

<sup>57</sup> By the time the young Michelangelo had arrived at the Medici household, Lorenzo de’ Medici had helped to release Pico from jail when he was imprisoned in 1486 by Pope Innocent VIII for his unorthodox Kabbalistic theories. *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>58</sup> Schuyler, “The Left Side of God,” 12.

<sup>59</sup> Maria Rzepińska, “The Divine Wisdom of Michelangelo in ‘The Creation of Adam.’” *Artibus et Historiae* 15, no. 29 (1994): 181.

<sup>60</sup> Schuyler, “The Left Side of God,” 15.

<sup>61</sup> The question of how much of the ceiling’s program was conceived of by Michelangelo and how much from some adviser or set of advisers is a much larger subject. Considering the tremendous scope of the Sistine Chapel’s decorations it would seem that there must have been advisers, though none have been definitively identified.

teaching of the church he would have portrayed Eve emerging from an incision in Adam's right side, paralleling the wound in Christ's right side.<sup>62</sup> The evangelists were not specific about the right or left sides of Christ, but Augustine had written that it was the right side. This could be an instance in which Michelangelo intentionally departed from Augustinian doctrine and instead followed the Kabbalah.<sup>63</sup>

Kabbalah is made up of a theosophical and cosmological core called the "Sefirotic system." The Sefirot are defined as a structure of emanations from God that form the entirety of creation, which here refers to a good deal more than the physical world.<sup>64</sup> Again, there is a split: between En-Sof, the knowable Lord or the God of religious experience, and The Creator, the unknowable En-Sof, the "hidden God." Evidence of this Sefirotic dualism may be reflected in the first two Genesis scenes, *The Separation of Light from Darkness* and *The Creation of Sun and Moon*.<sup>65</sup> In *The Creation of the Sun and Moon*, En-Sof is portrayed from behind, his face hidden and unknown, while the knowable Lord is seen from the front.<sup>66</sup>

Another potentially Kabbalistic element may be identified in the depiction of *The Creation of Adam*, in which the identity of the young woman nestled under God's arm has been much debated. Kabbalistic thought recognizes such a figure as the *Shekinah*, the female beloved of the Lord (and, not surprisingly, emerging from his left side). As a result of her closeness to the Lord, the *Shekinah* is connected with the community of Israel, the mystical Jewish Ecclesia and the *Neshamah*, the highest part of the tripartite soul.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>64</sup> Sagerman, *A Kabbalistic Reading*, 96.

<sup>65</sup> Gershom Scholem, an authority on Jewish mysticism, writes of "one God experienced from two different perspectives of man—the first beyond man's comprehension and the second accessible through mysticism." Schuyler, "The Left Side of God," 14.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 17.

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