

# The Exegetical Meaning of Nicolas Poussin's *Christ Healing the Blind (The Blind of Jericho)*\*

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**Abstract:** This article explores *Christ Healing the Blind*, painted by Nicolas Poussin in 1650. Previous studies of this work have linked its theme of bringing sight to the blind with vision and optics, along with identified its meta-painting meaning. As the patron of this piece, M. Reynon, was a Lyon silk manufacturer and merchant, an allegory of vision or color may, in fact, be appropriate. Yet, given that M. Reynon was also a devout Christian and passionate about charitable activities, it is imperative to reconsider the painting's religious aspect in greater depth.

When the work was discussed at a conference of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1667, an irreconcilable argument erupted over its fidelity to the Bible: whether it depicted a miracle at Jericho (Matthew 20) or Capernaum (Matthew 9). Through comparisons with previous portrayals of scenes of the blind being healed, this article suggests that Poussin's painting recalls not only events at Jericho and Capernaum, but also a scene, in which Jesus healed a man born blind in Jerusalem (John 9). Moreover, semiotic associations can be observed with Augustine and Cornelius a Lapide's biblical exegesis of the Gospel of John, especially through the emblematic motif of the stone represented in the painting. Through a visual rhetoric that skillfully arranges the semiotic elements of each form, Poussin naturally encourages the viewer to meditate on God's revelation. This would have been eminently suitable for a piece whose patron was passionately engaged in charitable work.

**Keywords:** religious painting, Jesus' miracles, Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, biblical exegesis, Cesare Ripa

## 1. Literature Survey and the Crux of the Problem

The French artist Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) painted *Christ Healing the Blind* (1650, Fig. 1), based on the New Testament of the Christian Bible, at the behest of one M. Reynon, a silk merchant in Lyon.<sup>1</sup>

Previous studies of this work, which was produced later in the artist's life, have linked its theme of bringing sight to the blind with *vision* and *optics*, identifying its meta-painting meaning. According to Oskar Bätschmann, with its use of color to express the restoration of sight to the blind, the work is an allegory of the generation of color from light and darkness (shade), as based in color theory and contemporary optics, mainly with reference to the authority of Aristotle.

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<sup>1</sup> André Félibien, *TABLEAU DU CABINET DU ROY...*, t. 1 (Paris, 1677), 11–12; Id., *ENTRETIENS...*, IV (Paris, 1685), 301–302. For basic information on this work, see Pierre Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin: Les tableaux du Louvre* (Paris, 2015), 256–263; Nicolas Milovanovic, *Catalogue des peintures françaises du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle du musée du Louvre* (Paris, 2021), 188–189.



Fig. 1. Nicolas Poussin, *Christ Healing the Blind (The Blind of Jericho)*, 1650, Oil on Canvas, 118 × 175.5 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey interpreted the work as an allegory of “painting” and of the “nature of vision, sight itself.”<sup>2</sup>

The work’s patron has been identified as either Silvio I Reynon, a silk textile manufacturer and merchant living in Lyon, or his son, Bernardin. As well as being enthusiastic art collectors, the Reynons were deeply concerned with design and color in the context of their own occupation, and it is thus unsurprising that

Poussin incorporated an allegory of “painting” and “the generation of color” into his work. Nonetheless, the Reynons were also involved with the charity hospital, or general almshouse, in Lyon and participated earnestly and devoutly in charitable activities associated with reforming French Catholicism. Thus, a more detailed discussion of the work’s religious dimension seems necessary.

While the scene depicted is clearly that of the blind being healed, Jesus performed this miracle many times throughout his ministry, and the specific Gospel passage drawn on as an authority remains uncertain. Indeed, when the work was featured at a conference of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in 1667, an irreconcilable argument broke out about its fidelity to the Bible, with opinions divided as to whether the work portrayed Jesus healing two blind men at Jericho (Matthew 20) or the miracle at Capernaum (Matthew 9).<sup>3</sup>

While opinions have been advanced in recent years in support of the latter possibility, the very fact that such a discussion took place at that time points to Poussin’s audacity in employing ambiguous representation. Not only did the painter faithfully depict a specific scene but, presumably, he also sought to leave space for the viewer to draw associations and meditate freely on multiple biblical passages.<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, in this paper, any attempt to identify the scriptural basis for the work (Matthew 20 or Matthew 9) will be temporarily set aside. Attention will focus instead on the miracle that Christ performed in healing the blind men in terms of the act itself, examining the semiotic associations that Poussin elicits from the viewer through his use of figurative devices.

After comparing Poussin’s work with previous depictions of the blind being healed, it is

<sup>2</sup> Oskar Bätschmann, *Nicolas Poussin: Dialectics of Paintings* (London, 1990), 30–44; Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the Love of Painting* (New Jersey, 1996), 206–215.

<sup>3</sup> André Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES...* (Paris, 1668), 108–144; Jacqueline Lichtenstein and Christian Michel, eds. *Conférences de l’Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture*, I-I (Paris, 2006), 175–195.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Jean Blanc, “How to Paint a Palm Tree When You Have Never Seen One? Peindre la Terre Sainte: autour de la Guérison des aveugles de Nicolas Poussin (1650),” in Donatela Bernardi and Noémie Étienne, eds. *Eternal Tour Jerusalem* (Genève, 2011), 217–224.

noted that associations can be found, particularly in terms of similarities with contemporary biblical illustrations, with the story of Jesus healing a man born blind in Jerusalem related in John 9. This passage is rarely discussed as a scriptural basis for the work. In other words, in addition to the events at Jericho and Capernaum, the work is reminiscent of the miracle that took place in Jerusalem. Moreover, this paper shows that the emblematic motif of the “stone” featured in Poussin’s work is derived from the image of *Penitence* in Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (*Iconologie* in the French version) and that its emblematic meaning—i.e., the purification of sin through Christ’s charity—accords with the biblical exegesis of the Gospel of John. This semiotic association is also closely related to the eleemosynary activities and faith of the Reynons. In light of this analysis, it is apparent that Poussin’s work, by evoking associations with several biblical passages, actively encourages viewers to think and meditate on the inherent exegetical meaning of the miracle of the blind being healed.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Description of the Work

Let us begin by looking at the work (Fig. 1). The scene is set outdoors in bright sunlight. In the background, a light haze covers a sheer mountain topped with a fortress-like structure, while the middle ground depicts a basilica with an oculus in the style of the early Christian era, a bell tower, and Palladian architecture, as well as a series what appear to be palaces, terraces, and gardens. Around the buildings, there is a body of water with people bathing (or washing) and walking along the shore. On the left, the water appears to be dammed by a stone wall that seems to form an artificial reservoir (pool). A serpentine waterway wends off toward the right.

In the middle of the foreground, Jesus touches the eyelids of a blind man who kneels on the ground, holding a cane. Behind Jesus, who is clothed in yellowish-white garb with a purple mantle, are three of his apostles: John, Peter, and James. A second blind man rests his hand on the shoulder of the man kneeling before Jesus, while himself being guided (or restrained) by another young man. Behind Christ and the blind man, two Jews and a Pharisee in a turban look on with keen interest. On the left side, viewers will notice a mother standing with a child in her arms, bearing witness to the event. At the far left, in the shadow of the doorway of a large building, there is a seated figure of a woman holding a child. In front of this building is a large square block of stone, with a cane resting against it. The sunlight shining obliquely from the left of the painting casts long shadows, throwing the figures of the people into sharp relief.

The solemnity and grandeur of this work, which is evident both in the group of figures and in the painting’s overall composition, was, as previous studies have indicated, learned by Poussin from the works of Raphael, especially the cartoons for the Sistine Chapel tapestries. Poussin also appears to have pursued perfection by directly referencing the art of classical antiquity for the proportions of his figures.<sup>6</sup> The poses of Jesus and the blind man in the center of the painting

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nicolas Milovanovic, “Poussin et l’exégèse,” in Nicolas Milovanovic and Mickaël Szanto, eds. *Poussin et Dieu* (Paris, 2015), 56–65.

<sup>6</sup> The groping blind man is derived from a cartoon by Raphael, *The Blinding of Elymas* (1515–16, Victoria and

recall a mural in the Catacomb of Domitilla (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> The building visible in the middle ground on the left is the Villa Garzadore, designed by Andrea Palladio,<sup>8</sup> while contemporary sketches imply that the scenery around the basilica drew on actual views of Rome (Fig. 3).<sup>9</sup>

Thus, while Poussin made use of archaeological knowledge, he drew on Raphael and classical antiquity for the entirety of his monumental composition and expressions of the human figure. Furthermore, through his fusion of buildings representative of classicism and structures that would have been seen in early Christian Rome, and in combination with lush greenery and a flowing body of cool, refreshing water, the artist produced an idyllic landscape with timeless evocative force.



Fig. 2. Anonym, *Paintings and Inscriptions in the Catacomb of Domitilla, Rome*, Drawing from the Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, ca. 1639, Windsor Castle Royal Library, detail. Source: John Osborne and Amanda Claridge, *Early Christian and Medieval Antiquities*, vol.1, *Mosaics and Wallpaintings in Roman Churches*, The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo. A Catalogue Raisonné, series A, pt.2 (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), 64–68.



Fig. 3. Attributed G. A. Dosio, *Sacra via, Rome, Architectura Civile*, Drawing from the Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, 16-17<sup>th</sup> century, Windsor Castle Royal Library. Source: Ian Campell, *Ancient Roman Topography and Architecture*, vol. 1, The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo. A Catalogue Raisonné, series A, pt.9 (London: Harvey Miller, 2004), no. 88.

### 3. Commission by Reynon of Lyon, Merchant

As related by André Félibien, the work painted in 1650 was commissioned by “le sieur Reynon, marchand de Lyon.” At the behest of the same M. Reynon, Poussin also painted *The Finding of Moses* (The National Gallery, London) in the following year.<sup>10</sup> “M. Reynon” may refer either to the silk manufacturer and merchant Silvio I Reynon (1580/90–1666) or to his son

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Albert Museum, London). Sébastien Bourdon has identified the proportions of figures with those of ancient sculptures: the *Farnese Gladiator* (*Dying Gaul*, The National Archeological Museum of Naples), the *Apollo Belvedere* (The Vatican Museum), and the *Medici Venus* (The Uffizi Gallery, Florence). Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES*, 119–120; Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, 182–183, n.10, 11.

<sup>7</sup> Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, 394. Several drawings survive in the Paper Museum (*Museo Cartaceo*) assembled by Cassiano dal Pozzo, an important patron of Poussin in Rome. John Osborne and Amanda Claridge, *Early Christian and Medieval Antiquities*, vol.1, The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, A-2 (London, 1996), 64–68. Cf. Antonio Bosio, *Roma Sotterranea* (Roma, 1632), 249.

<sup>8</sup> Andrea Palladio, *I QUATRO LIBRI DELL'ARCHITETTURA*, vol. 2 (Venetia, 1570), 77, 79; Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin* (London, 1995), 239.

<sup>9</sup> Ian Campell, *Ancient Roman Topography and Architecture*, vol. 1, The Paper Museum of Cassiano dal Pozzo, A-9 (London, 2004), 278, 280, no. 88. Cropper and Dempsey have pointed out associations with the drawing by Marten van Heemskerck, *The Vatican and St. Peter's* (The Albertina Museum, Vienna). Cropper and Dempsey, *Poussin*, 209, fig. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Félibien, *ENTRETIENS*, 301–303.

Bernardin (1613–1686).<sup>11</sup> Silvio, a native of Naples, was somewhat older than Poussin. As a young man, Poussin had produced *The Death of Chione* (1622, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon) for Silvio.<sup>12</sup> Bernardin pursued the family business with his father and amassed considerable wealth. From a property inventory dating from the death of Bernardin's son in 1691, the Reynon family is then known to have held an art collection of over 300 works.

The list of paintings in the collection (133 paintings and 13 miniatures) features the names of Poussin and other French painters, and of Italian artists such as Bassano and Carracci. Thematically, the works include portraits, landscapes, mythological images, and flowers and animals. Nevertheless, religious paintings represent the highest proportion of the collection (more than 45).<sup>13</sup>

Silvio and Bernardin, both devout Christians, were involved in the activities of the charity hospital, or general almshouse, in Lyon and are known to have pursued their charitable interests enthusiastically. After the establishment of the Congregation of Christian Doctrine, Silvio became a member of the Company of the Blessed Sacrament in 1654. A private organization that played a leading role in reforming Catholicism, the Company was a secret society that regarded ardent Eucharistic adoration as the core of faith and relieving poverty as an important devotional activity. Moreover, in 1655, Silvio was temporarily assigned from the charity hospital to the St. Catherine Hospital, where he gave public instruction in Christian catechism and engaged in spiritual practice.<sup>14</sup> Bernardin was chosen to serve as rector of the charity hospital in 1662–63.<sup>15</sup>

Silvio also owned an extensive library of religious and secular books in Italian, Latin, and French and, in addition to being a reader of religious texts, was involved in their publication. At the behest of Cardinal Richelieu, he translated texts on Christian doctrine by Charles Borromeo of Milan into French and arranged for their publication by the Lyon publishing house of Jérôme de La Garde.

Silvio's art collection included works associated with subjects directly related to his faith, such as *Madonna and Child with St. Charles Borromeo*, *Roman Charity*, and the *Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament*.<sup>16</sup>

As for *Christ Healing the Blind*, historical sources are silent as to whether the subject matter was specified when the work was commissioned. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to ask what kind of ideas Poussin would have applied to a work for such a devoutly religious patron.

<sup>11</sup> Henriette Pommier, "Richesse insoupçonnée d'une collection lyonnaise du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Les Reynon, marchands de soie et fabricants," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français* (2013[2014]): 41–63.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Rosenberg, "Nicolas Poussin's 'The death of Chione,'" *The Burlington Magazine* 159 (2017): 184–186. See also: Id., "Les cinq Poussin des Reynon," *Bulletin de la société de l'histoire de l'art français* (2013[2014]): 31–39.

<sup>13</sup> Pommier, "Richesse," 47–51, 60–63.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43; Georges Guigue, *Les papiers des dévots de Lyon, Recueil de textes sur la Compagnie secrète du Saint-Sacrement...* (Lyon, 1922), 73, 82, 93, 213–215; Emile Perret de la Menue, *Recherches historiques sur les batiments connu à Lyon sous le nom d'Hôpital des Catherines* (Lyon, 1877), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Pommier, "Richesse," 43; René Chausse, ed. *INSTITUTION DE L'AVMOSNE GENERALE DE LYON*, 6<sup>ème</sup> éd. (Lyon, 1662), 143; *CATALOGVE DE MESSIEVRS LES RECTEVRS NOMMEZ, POVR L'ADMINISTRATION de l'Aumosne Generale en la Ville de Lyon...* (Lyon, 1672), 88.

<sup>16</sup> Pommier, "Richesse," 44, 50, 60–63. Cf. *La DOCTRINE CHRESTIENNE Selon l'Ordre & l'Institution de Saint CHARLES BORROME'E* (Lyon, 1643, reed. 1645).

#### 4. Debate over Biblical Fidelity: Conference of the Academy

After *Christ Healing the Blind* (Fig. 1) was acquired by the collection of Louis XIV in 1665, it was taken up as a matter for discussion at the seventh conference of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture held in December 1667.

This section briefly recapitulates the debate over fidelity to biblical description that occurred at the conference. This debate presupposed that Poussin, as an exemplar of the Academy, would have undertaken an accurate depiction, suited to the *decorum* appropriate for the setting of a miracle and in accordance with accounts in the Gospels and by Flavius Josephus. The lecturer in this case was the painter Sébastien Bourdon (1616–1671), who regarded the work as a portrayal of the healing of two blind men in Jericho. According to Bourdon, Poussin’s presentation of Jericho as the setting of the story was based on its portrayal by Josephus in *The Jewish War*. Bourdon devoted particular attention to the carefully painted stream and verdant nature, and to the presence of palaces and houses, arguing that Poussin had carefully read Josephus.<sup>17</sup>

When the lecture concluded and the floor was opened for discussion, one speaker—probably Philippe de Champaigne, as the criticism here reflects Champaigne’s own painting on the same theme (Fig. 4)<sup>18</sup>—criticized Poussin’s work for a perceived lack of fidelity to the Bible. Specifically, he argued that, while the Bible states that “as they went out of Jericho, a great crowd followed him” (Matthew 20:29, English Standard Version Bible: ESV),<sup>19</sup> the people in Poussin’s painting are far too few to merit being called a crowd. In response, a second speaker, presumed to have been the painter Jean Nocret, sought to defend Poussin. According to this man, to achieve a “general expression,” Poussin eliminated the otherwise unnecessary crowd to focus the viewers’ attention on the miraculous act of healing, thereby preventing confusion.<sup>20</sup>

A third speaker (most likely Charles le Brun)<sup>21</sup> then appeared, affirming the work’s fidelity to biblical description and arguing that the scene is not that of the miracle at Jericho but rather the healing of the two blind men at Capernaum (Matthew 9).<sup>22</sup> His reasoning was that, while Josephus certainly describes Jericho in terms of its natural beauty irrigated by a



Fig. 4. Philippe de Champaigne, *Christ Healing the Blind at Jericho*, ca. 1655–60, oil on canvas, 102.2 × 141.9 cm, Putnam Foundation, Timken Museum of Art, San Diego.

<sup>17</sup> Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES*, 117–118. See also *LES SEPT LIVRES de Flavius Iosephus de la guerre ET CAPTIVITÉ DES IVIFZ* (Paris, 1553), feuil. CL.

<sup>18</sup> Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, 184, n.13.

<sup>19</sup> *LA SAINCTE BIBLE* (Paris, 1608), 1053.

<sup>20</sup> Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES*, 124–125.

<sup>21</sup> The identification of this third speaker is problematic. For this issue see Lichtenstein and Michel, *Conférences*, 188, n.16.

<sup>22</sup> *SAINCTE BIBLE*, 1040.

spring, upon reading further one finds that “Jericho lies in the plain quite close to a mountain that is entirely bare, sterile, and very long, a mountain so harsh that it produces nothing and is entirely uninhabited.” This does not accord with Poussin’s depiction. Moreover, while Jericho was renowned as the city of palm trees, no such trees are visible in Poussin’s painting.<sup>23</sup>

Conversely, Capernaum, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, was “the capital and most considerable city of Upper Galilee, very populous and filled with a host of magnificent palaces and rich houses.” According to Josephus, it was a fertile and temperate land<sup>24</sup>. The speaker also claimed that Poussin painted the scenery around Capernaum with reference to the depiction by Christian van Adrichem, based on pilgrims’ accounts at the beginning of the sixteenth century, as well as in the writings of Jean Zuallart, who actually visited the Holy Land in the late sixteenth century.<sup>25</sup> Since the debate over the work’s fidelity to the Bible found no resolution, it was abruptly concluded that “Monsieur Poussin has treated his story with great verisimilitude.”<sup>26</sup>

More recently, Cropper and Dempsey have argued that the scene is very likely to be the healing of the blind at Capernaum, the hometown of St. Peter, because Poussin’s work features only 3 of the 12 apostles (John, Peter, and James). Moreover, according to their interpretation, the placement of the structures in the background may represent the symbolic origins of St. Peter and the Vatican palace.<sup>27</sup>

Poussin painted his landscape with timeless poetic and evocative force using buildings from various periods. Conversely, he omitted motifs, such as palm trees and teeming crowds, that would identify specific biblical passages. Unsurprisingly, the discussion at the Academy did not coalesce around a single biblical passage. It may thus be best to interpret this work as marked by an intentionality that aims to satisfy *decorum* in terms of some aspect other than fidelity to biblical description.

## 5. Iconographical Traditions of the Healing of the Blind

Although the discussion at the conference questioned whether Poussin’s work depicted the miracle at Jericho or the affair at Capernaum based on the presence of at least *two* blind men, Christ performed the miracle of healing the sick many times during his ministry. Cases of him healing the blind are also mentioned in several passages in the Gospels, chief among which are the following

- (1) The healing of the blind at Jericho (Luke 18:35–43, Matthew 20:29–34, Mark 10:46–52). In Luke 18 and Mark 10, Jesus heals a single blind man by his voice alone. In Matthew 20, the passage advanced at the conference, Christ heals two blind men by touching their

<sup>23</sup> Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES*, 135. English translation by Chris Miller, Christian Michel and Jacqueline Lichtenstein, eds. *Lectures on Art* (Los Angeles, 2020), 98.

<sup>24</sup> Josephus, *LES SEPT LIVRES*, feuil. CXXV.

<sup>25</sup> Christian van Adrichem, *THEATRUM TERRAE SANCTAE ET BIBLICARUM HISTORIARUM* (Cologne, 1590), 103–104; Jean Zuallart, *LE TRES DEVOT VOYAGE DE IERUSALEM* (Anvers, 1608), 61–62. Although the speaker does not refer to Adrichem and Zuallart by name, Félibien cites these authorities in the notes to the conference proceedings. Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES*, 137.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. Trans. by Miller, 99.

<sup>27</sup> Cropper and Dempsey, *Poussin*, 209.

eyes. All three descriptions involve crowds.

- (2) The miracle at Capernaum (Matthew 9:27–31). The other passage advanced at the conference. Jesus heals two blind men at a house in Capernaum by touching their eyes.
- (3) The miracle at Bethsaida (Mark 8:22–26). At Bethsaida, Jesus performs the miracle of healing by spitting on the eyes of a blind man.
- (4) The healing of a man who was born blind (John 9:1–41). Jesus exited the temple in Jerusalem and, seeing a man blind from birth, anointed the man's eyes with mud and instructed him to wash in the pool of Siloam.

Let us now ask how the miracle of the healing of the blind has traditionally been represented in painting.<sup>28</sup> On murals in early Christian catacombs, carved reliefs on sarcophagi, and Byzantine mosaics, the focus is placed on the miraculous act itself, with close-up representations of Jesus and the blind man. There are examples of single blind man (Fig. 2), blind men in pairs, and the blind in combination with the lame. In many such cases, Christ is touching the eyes of the blind man.

Once narrative representations began to emerge in the Middle Ages, examples appeared of (presumably) the miracles at Jericho or Jerusalem. In early depictions of the former, Christ lays his hands on the eyes of the blind man, but examples with Jesus healing the blind through speech gradually increase. For example, one ninth-century mural (ca. 800, wall painting from the large cycle in the abbey of Saint John at Müstair) shows a scene from Jericho with two blind men sitting and Christ speaking to them without touching their eyes.<sup>29</sup> In the seventeenth century, Philippe de Champaigne (the probable first speaker in the discussion at the Academy conference) painted a work based on Matthew 20, the miracle at Jericho (Fig. 4). In this example, Jesus, accompanied by a large crowd, is calling out to two blind men at the side of a road in the midst of an expansive landscape that includes palm trees and a flowing river. Bourdon, the painter who delivered the conference address, also left a work supposedly based on Matthew 20. In this work (*Christ and two blind men of Jericho*, ca. 1660s, Musée du Service de Santé des Armées, Paris), Jesus stands beside two blind men in the midst of a crowd but does not touch their eyes.<sup>30</sup>

Conversely, representations of the story related in John 9 of Jesus healing a man born blind in Jerusalem largely tend to depict Jesus touching the eyes of the blind. The description in the Gospel of John differs significantly from descriptions in other passages in several respects. For example, Jesus heals a man who is *congenitally* blind and, to do so, he “made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam’ (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see (John 9: 6–7, ESV).”<sup>31</sup> Then, in the second part of this episode, in an exposition absent from the other Gospels, John relates the attitudes of Pharisees who reviled Christ for performing this miracle on the Sabbath and of Jews

<sup>28</sup> Engelbert Kirschbaum, ed. *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 1 (Rom, Freiburg, 1990), 304–307; Karl Künstle, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, vol. 1 (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1928), 392; Louis Réau, *Iconographie de l'art chrétien*, II-II (Paris, 1957), 371–373; Gertrud Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, vol. 1 (Gütersloh, 1966), 179–182, 452–459.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 454, fig. 512.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Thuillier, *Sébastien Bourdon* (Paris, 2000), 442.

<sup>31</sup> *SAINCTE BIBLE*, 1131.



who would not accept Christ's miracle (John 9:14–41).<sup>32</sup>

Depictions of this scene in medieval murals and manuscripts typically show Christ, followed by several of his apostles, touching the eyes of the blind. While representations of the pool of Siloam are varied, it is often drawn in the same panel, with the blind man washing his eyes therein. In other words, the blind man appears twice in a single image depicting successive events (Fig. 5). In some cases, the blind man washing his eyes in the fountain is surrounded by Jewish onlookers. This style continued to be emulated in later periods in well-known works such as Duccio's *The Healing of the Man Born Blind* (1307/8–11, The National Gallery, London) and El Greco's *Christ Healing the Blind* (three copies, ca. 1567–70, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden etc.). In these works, Jesus is touching the eyes of the blind man, and the blind man is portrayed twice.

One might also consider the biblical illustrations and engravings in circulation during Poussin's lifetime. Previous studies have shown that Poussin referred to such engravings and illustrations when creating his works, while Reynon, who commissioned this piece, had a deep interest in books. In the case of biblical illustrations, the fact that the scriptural basis is necessarily explicit allows any differences in images for different parts of the Gospel to be clearly ascertained.

The scene of the healing of the blind at Jericho, as mentioned above, accords with Matthew 20, Mark 10, and Luke 18 in the synoptic Gospels, and illustrations were often provided for Luke 18. For example, the illustration for Luke 18 in *Evangelicae Historiae Imagines* (1593), commissioned by the Jesuit missionary Jérôme Nadal, offers a depiction of Jericho (as indicated by the palm trees) that shows Jesus, accompanied by crowds, speaking to a blind man (Fig. 6).<sup>33</sup>

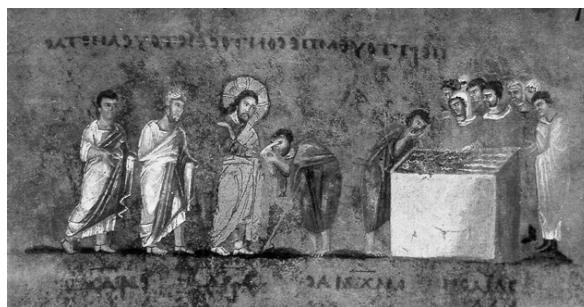


Fig. 5. *Healing of the Man Born Blind*, Manuscript Illumination, 6<sup>th</sup> century, *Codex Purpureus Rossanensis*, Cathedral of Rossano, Calabria, Archbishopal Treasury.



Fig. 6. Antoon Wierix after Bernardino Passeri, *A Blind Man is Healed before Jericho*, in Jérôme Nadal, *Evangelicae HISTORIAE IMAGINE...* (Antverpiae: Martinus Nutius, 1593), pl. 83.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1131–1132.

<sup>33</sup> Jérôme Nadal, *Evangelicae HISTORIAE IMAGINES...* (Antverpiae, 1593), pl. 83. Other examples: Hanns Lautensack, *Christ Heals the Blind Man* (Staatlich Graphische Sammlung, Munich); Virgil Solis, *Christ Heals a Blind Man (Luke 18)* (British Museum, London). In the latter, Christ is touching the eyes of a single blind man.



Fig. 7. Antoon Wierix after Bernardino Passeri, *Healing of the Man Born Blind*, in Jérôme Nadal, *Evangelicae HISTORIAE IMAGINE...* (Antverpiae: Martinus Nutius, 1593), pl. 57.



Fig. 8. Adriaen Collaert, *Healing of the Man Born Blind*, in *VITA IESU SALVATORIS, varijs iconibus ab Adriano Collart expressa* (Antverpiae: Adriaen Collaert, ca.1593), pl. 30.



Fig. 9. Leonardo Parasole after Antonio Tempesta, *Healing of the Man Born Blind*, in *Testamentum novum, Arabice et Latine*, (Roma, 1591), British Museum, London. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Conversely, there are numerous examples of biblical illustrations and engravings that portray the healing of the man born blind at Jerusalem in John 9. In one example from Nadal's book (Fig. 7), Christ is drawn touching the eyes of the kneeling blind man as his disciples bear witness to the act. On the left are Pharisees, who question the man whose eyes have been healed. On the right, a blind man is seated near a temple, showing this to be a diachronic image. In the background on the right, the pool of Siloam is visible against a backdrop of mountains. In another example of a biblical illustration (Fig. 8), trees and buildings are drawn in the background, with the disciples striking various poses on either side of Christ, who touches the eyes of a blind man in the center. The same blind man sits on the right. In a woodcut by Leonardo Parasole and Antonio Tempesta (Fig. 9), Christ, accompanied by his disciples, touches the eyelids of a kneeling blind man. In the middle ground, the blind man, now sighted, is visible beside a pool of water and against a backdrop of mountains.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, in *Figures de la sainte Bible* (1614, Fig. 10), a blind man sits with a cane in hand atop a rock in front of the temple, with Christ touching his eyelids as the disciples watch the spectacle from behind. On the right side are a spring and flowing water in which the blind man washes his eyes. The

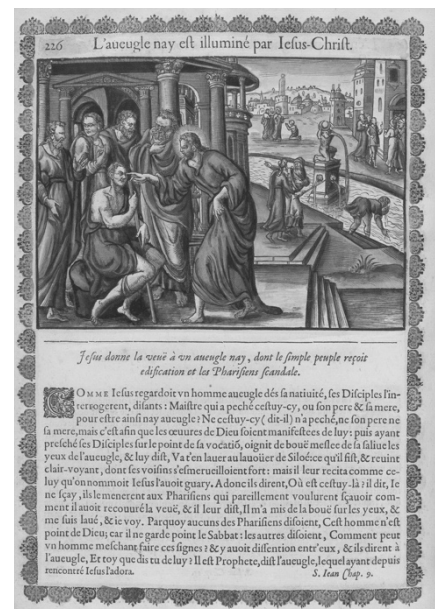


Fig. 10. *Healing of the Man Born Blind*, in *FIGURES DE LA SAINTE BIBLE...* (Paris: Jean Le Clerc, 1614), 226.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pl. 57; Marjolein Leesberg and Arnout Balis, *The New Hollstein Dutch & Flemish Etchings, Engravings and Woodcuts 1450–1700: The Collaert Dynasty*, part 1 (Ouderkerk aan den Ijssel, 2005), 129, no. 136; Georg Kaspar Nagler, *Die Monogrammisten und diejenigen bekannten und unbekanntenen Künstler aller Schulen...*, vol. 4 (München, 1860), 410, no. 1256.

blind man can also be seen being accosted by Jews. In this case, the flowing water, Christ's gestures, and the arrangement and poses of the onlookers who surround the blind man are among the compositional elements shared with Poussin.<sup>35</sup>

Biblical illustrations of scenes supposed to be the healing of the blind in Jericho include instances of two blind men and one blind man. In many examples, Christ is speaking (healing with his voice), and the presence of palm trees and crowds represents a key to setting the scene. Conversely, while depictions of the healing of the man born blind at Jerusalem in John 9 show a single blind man, he is often depicted twice in the same panel as a diachronic image, and the pool of Siloam is always shown. Christ touching the eyes of the blind man, and the depictions of the Pharisees and Jews questioning the blind man, can be said to be typical.

## 6. Associations with the "Healing of the Man Born Blind" in Jerusalem in John 9

Revisiting Poussin's work in light of the above, it is apparent that the representation includes elements that only match the description of John 9. First, in the Gospel of John, when Christ performs this miracle he states that: "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day... As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world" (John 9:4–5, ESV).<sup>36</sup> Only the Gospel of John explicitly describes Christ as the light of the world. Poussin's work depicts a scene that takes place on a bright morning. As analyzed by Bourdon at the Academy conference, Poussin used the colors of Christ's raiment—yellow and white most closely manifest the qualities of light, while robes of purple, a mixture of red and blue, take on the nature of light and air—to represent Christ not as one who is illuminated by light but as a source of light himself.<sup>37</sup>

In addition, the events related in the latter half of John 9, specifically the indignation of the Pharisees at Christ not observing the Sabbath and the Jews' disbelief in the miracle, are perhaps represented by the expressions and comportment of the Jews who observe Christ and the blind man. A preparatory drawing associated with this work (Fig. 11) similarly depicts a Jew observing the healing of *a single blind man*, a fact that supports the artist's later addition of a second blind man in the finished work.<sup>38</sup> In other words, rather than accurately painting a specific Bible passage, it seems conceivable that Poussin may have envisioned the "healing of the blind" as a miracle tale associated with Jesus, focusing on the act itself.



Fig. 11. Nicolas Poussin, *Christ Healing the Blind*, ca. 1650, Pen, brown ink and traces of black chalk, 11.3 × 19.6 cm, Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, inv. 1678.

<sup>35</sup> *FIGURES DE LA SAINCTE BIBLE...* (Paris, 1614), 226.

<sup>36</sup> *SAINCTE BIBLE*, 1131.

<sup>37</sup> Félibien, *CONFÉRENCES*, 121. Cf. Bätschmann, *Poussin*, 37.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat, *Nicolas Poussin: Catalogue raisonné des dessins* (Milano, 1994), 670–671.

Poussin's work does not portray Jerusalem in geographical terms. As noted by Zuallart, referenced at the conference, however, the fount of Siloam at the foot of Mount Zion in Jerusalem, whose waters flow from the Gihon Spring, only intermittently produces vigorous flows of water. The pool of Siloam, fed by underground channels, provided Jerusalem with tranquil flows of water, irrigating its gardens.<sup>39</sup> The Book of Isaiah refers to "the waters of Shiloah that flow gently" (Isaiah 8:6, ESV).<sup>40</sup> Poussin's painting features a pool of water that might be a reservoir and from which a tranquil flow of water issues. This might suggest the pool of Siloam.

The Reynons were familiar with the biblical descriptions and illustrations that were then current. Given the composition of Poussin's work, the poses of the figures therein, the depictions of the onlookers, and the reservoir or river, it is highly likely that the Reynons would have recalled not only the miracle at Jericho but also the "healing of the man born blind" related in the Gospel of John. The absence of palm trees, which would have established the scene as the miracle at Jericho, as well as the absence of a crowd, were undoubtedly elements that intentionally obscured the identification of a specific scriptural basis for this painting.

Indeed, Poussin's biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori used the title *Il cieco illuminato* [The Blind Man Receiving Sight] to describe this work. He observed that Christ is depicted touching the eyes to bring vision to "*cieco nato* [the man who was born blind]" and noted that, behind Christ and the blind man, an elderly Jew leans forward "in disbelief" and another Jew in a turban spreads his hands "in amazement." While Bellori also mentioned another blind man in the midst of his description and concluded that the scene of the painting was a town outside Jericho, the depiction very much seems to combine elements from John 9 and Matthew 20.<sup>41</sup>

## 7. Biblical Exegesis of the Gospel of John

Because Poussin's tableau depicts at least *two* blind men, both the discussion at the Academy and recent studies have largely ignored any potential associations between it and the Gospel of John's account of the miracle of the healing of the man born blind. However, based on the above iconographical analysis and the description given by Bellori, some room clearly exists to give consideration to John 9.

Accordingly, the following analysis of the Gospel of John emphasizes the healing of the blind man in terms of the miracle itself. One reason for this approach is that, in addition to the similarity of their iconography, the synoptic Gospels offer little more than brief attestations that the healing of the blind took place. By contrast, the Gospel of John describes the event in detail over an entire chapter, including the meaning of the miracle. Furthermore, as noted by Nicolas Milovanovic, Poussin may have been particularly influenced by the Gospel of John because the artist drew heavily on the writings of St. Augustine, who placed special emphasis on the role of John the Evangelist. St. Augustine's works exerted extensive influence over seventeenth-century France

<sup>39</sup> Zuallart, *VOYAGE*, 56.

<sup>40</sup> *SAINCTE BIBLE*, 738.

<sup>41</sup> Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *LE VITE...* (Roma, 1672), 452–453.

and played a major role in the development of French mystical thought.<sup>42</sup>

The tradition of biblical exegesis of John 9 can now be examined by considering the various allegorical interpretations derived from depictions that evoke the account given in the Gospel of John. This discussion will rely chiefly on interpretations of the Gospel of John found in St. Augustine's *Tractatus in Evangelium Iohannis* (ca. 419) and *Commentarii in Evangelia* (1638) by the Flemish Jesuit Cornelius a Lapide.

According to St. Augustine's *Tractates*, the man born blind symbolizes the human legacy of original sin—human beings are born sightless in spiritual rather than bodily terms. Washing the eyes in the pool of Siloam implies baptism by Christ and, more specifically, that sinful human beings are awakened to belief and turned toward baptism through the guidance of Jesus' light. Siloam refers to one who has been sent, namely Jesus Christ himself. Although this sightlessness is itself a sin, those who realize their sightlessness will have that sin taken away. Conversely, those who claim to be sighted will remain in sin.<sup>43</sup>

A Lapide's *Commentary* on John 9, which frequently cites St. Augustine, offers the following explanation. "Siloam was the type of Christian Baptism, whereby we are spiritually enlightened. . . .this man was enlightened both in body and mind by the waters of Siloam. There is great affinity between water and light, ablution and illumination." The waters of Siloam cleanse the eyes, i.e., they wash away sin and bring light simultaneously to the spirit and to the eyes. "But he who is baptized receives the light of the mind through faith, hope, and charity, which are infused into him by God in baptism."<sup>44</sup>

Poussin's work stands out in terms of its portrayal of light and water, particularly in the overall effect of the light, the flow of the water, and the reflections on the water's surface. That Bourdon's address to the Academy conference began with a commentary on Poussin's representation of light is suggestive. Nevertheless, the relationship between Poussin's pictorial representations and the biblical interpretation of the Gospel of John, which interprets the relationship between light and water in terms of baptism and the washing away of sin by the light of Christ, may still be somewhat vague. Importantly, however, the emblematic motif of stone that Poussin incorporated into his painting strengthens its association with the commentaries on the Gospel of John. This carefully drawn stone is meaningfully placed at a remove from the people, on the left side of the canvas, where the viewer's eye is caught by the blind man's cane resting against it (Fig. 1).

It has been noted repeatedly that this stone represents "the cornerstone" that symbolizes Christ, and that it serves as an important motif for strengthening the divine Providence expressed by this work.<sup>45</sup> The Bible says "...therefore thus says the Lord God, 'Behold, I am the one who

<sup>42</sup> Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, passim.

<sup>43</sup> TOMVS IX. OPERVM D. AVRELLI AVGVSTINI HIPPONENSIS EPISCOPI, CONTINENS ILLIVS TRACTATVS (Antverpiae, 1576), 133–135. St. Augustine: *Tractates on the Gospel on John 28–54*, translated by John W. Retig, (Washington D. C., 2002), 175–186.

<sup>44</sup> R. P. CORN. CORNELII A LAPIDE E SOCIETATE IESV, S. SCRIPTVRAE OLIM LOVANII, POSTEA ROMAE PROFESSORIS COMMENTARII IN EVANGELIA, tome II (Lugduni, 1638), 387–395. Paul A. Böer, ed. *The Great Commentary of Cornelius a Lapide: The Gospel of St. John*, (Columbia, 2012), 311–327, esp. 316–318.

<sup>45</sup> Milovan Stanić, "Le mode énigmatique dans l'art de Poussin," in Olivier Bonafait, ed. *Poussin et Rome*, (Paris, 1996), 93–117, esp. 100; Milovanovic, "l'exégèse," 59–60.



has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation...” (Isaiah 28:16, ESV), and “...Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone...” (Ephesians 2:20, ESV).<sup>46</sup> If the stone in Poussin’s painting is reminiscent of the cornerstone, then the place where the stone has been laid must be Zion, i.e., Jerusalem, and must also be linked to the pool of Siloam at the foot of Mount Zion. The pool of Siloam also “means Sent” and is in that sense an expression of Christ himself.<sup>47</sup>

Here, it should be noted that this stone derives from the allegory of *Penitence* found in Ripa’s *Iconologia* and that the biblical commentary on the Gospel of John and Poussin’s work were closely linked through the intermediary of Ripa’s work. The first Parisian edition of *Iconologie* (on which this discussion relies) was translated by Jean Baudouin and published in 1636 with engravings by Jacques de Bie.<sup>48</sup> While Poussin was based mostly in Rome, he returned to Paris at the invitation of Louis XIII from 1640 to 1642. Poussin’s stay post-dated the publication of the Parisian edition of Ripa’s work, and he would no doubt have had an interest in it. In 1643/44, an expanded and revised version of the French translation was published, including the addition of a second part as well as several new illustrations. In painting a work for the Reynons, who were not only art collectors but also involved in publishing, might Poussin not have acquired this revised and expanded edition? In the entry for *Penitence* contained in the new second part, the text is adapted from the Italian edition but is illustrated with an engraving not found in the Italian edition. The production of new engravings would also likely have attracted Poussin’s attention.

According to Ripa, the stone on which the female personification of *Penitence* sits (Fig. 12) is none other than Jesus Christ himself, and the waters that spring forth are the inexhaustible grace of God. By sitting on the stone, the sinner’s thoughts are directed to the contemplation of grace. In Poussin’s work, the cane that has been abandoned is that of the blind man—a metonym for the sin symbolized by blindness. In Ripa’s work, a woman regrets her sin, and by sitting atop the



Fig. 12. Jacques de Bie, *Pénitence*, in Cesare Ripa, *ICONOLOGIE...* (Paris: Mathiev Gvillemot, 1643/44), 2<sup>nd</sup> partie, 138.



Fig. 13. Nicolas Poussin, *Healing of the Blind* (Fig.1), detail.

<sup>46</sup> *SAINCTE BIBLE*, 752, 1227.

<sup>47</sup> *SAINCTE BIBLE*, 1131; *Tractates*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Cesare Ripa, *ICONOLOGIE* (Paris, 1636).

stone representing Christ, her sin is washed away and her soul made pure.<sup>49</sup> In Poussin's work, the blind man's cane suggests sin. In Christ's guidance one sees "the blind man" set free from this sin and guided from darkness into light—from sin into belief. This is a suggestion of salvation through baptism by water, a sacrament delivered for humanity's sake by Christ's pure benevolence.

In the illustration for *Penitence* engraved by de Bie (Fig. 12), the stone on which she sits is immersed in waters that flow from the spring. Importantly, the ground around the rock painted by Poussin also seems to be soaked with water (Fig. 13). It seems clear that only the area immediately around the stone is immersed in water, given the painting's subtle depiction of the reflection of the stone on its surface. In other words, the cane of the blind man is being cleansed by water. Nor is it likely mere coincidence that a woman captured in profile is seated in the entrance of a building situated just above the stone.

## 8. Conclusion: As a Work for the Reynons

A woman standing on the right of the stone with a child in her arms bears witness to Christ's miracle (Fig. 1). The motif of a woman standing with a child in arms was also incorporated into a work by Poussin three years later, namely *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (Fig. 14),<sup>50</sup> which depicts an episode only found in the Gospel of John. As a traditional personification of *Charity* (Fig. 15),<sup>51</sup> she looks on as the sins of the adulterous woman are absolved.<sup>52</sup> According to the explanation given in St. Augustine's *Tractates* for the "adulterous woman," Jesus' act is based on the words of Psalm 86 ("But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious..." ESV). This gives rise to the interpretation that Christ's benevolence emphasizes his generosity in

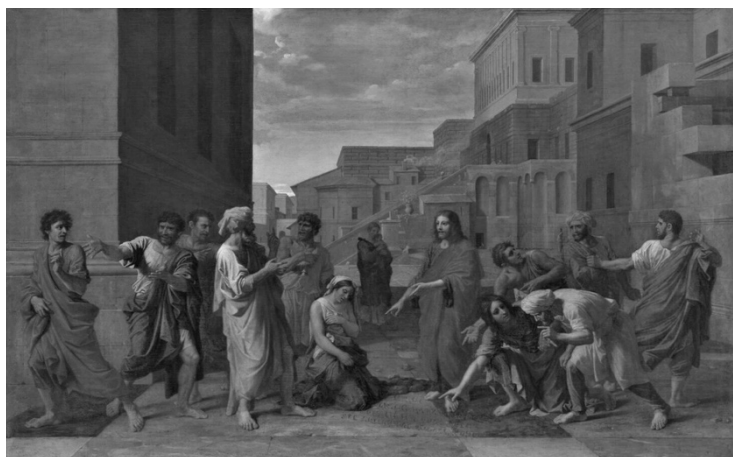


Fig. 14. Nicolas Poussin, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, ca. 1653, Oil on Canvas, 121 × 195 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 15. Giuseppe Cesari, *Carità*, in Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia...* (Roma: Lepido Facii, 1603), 64.

<sup>49</sup> Cesare Ripa, *ICONOLOGIE* (Paris, 1643/44), 138–139.

<sup>50</sup> Milovanovic, *Catalogue*, 189–190.

<sup>51</sup> Cesare Ripa, *ICONOLOGIA* (Roma, 1603), 63–66.

<sup>52</sup> Poussin might have used the illustration of *Penitence* (Fig. 12) for the attitude of the adulterous woman in *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* (Fig. 14). Christophe Angebault, "Le Christ et la femme adultère de Nicolas Poussin (1653): L'adultération de la souveraineté dans le dispositif de la représentation," in Pierre A. Fabre et al., eds. *À force de signes* (Paris, 2018), 467–480.

contrast to the old laws of the Pharisees who accused the adulterous woman.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, this personification of benevolence (*Charity*) also appears as a witness to the miracle in *Christ Healing the Blind* (Fig. 1). She represents the benevolence of Christ, which opposes the Pharisees who condemn Christ for not observing the Sabbath, as written in John 9. She stands one step removed from the curious Jews, quietly watching the event unfold.

Poussin's decision to depict *two* blind men in an ambiguous setting would have stood out. It attests to his desire to empathically show the important miracle that Christ performed in "healing the blind" and to recall the appearance of this miracle in several passages of the Gospels. Even in a period that favored *decorum* in pursuit of verisimilitude, beyond faithfully reproducing a single event from the Bible, there was still room for free meditation on Christ's miracles. The viewer is invited to a philosophical consideration of the meaning of the miracle of the healing of the blind as described in the Gospel of John. Specifically, the intention is to contemplate the allegorical meaning of the purification of sin by Christ's benevolence and its association with baptism, as explained in the biblical exegeses of St. Augustine and others. To achieve this, the following elements are key: the composition of the canvas and the arrangement of the people, the representations of clear light and water and the emblematic motifs of the stone and the cane, and finally, the links with the semiotic ramifications of the image of the woman with a child in her arms. Through a visual rhetoric that skillfully arranges the semiotic elements of each form, the viewer is naturally encouraged to meditate on God's revelation. Poussin's painting was thus eminently suitable as a work for the Reynon family, whose members were passionately engaged in enlightenment activities and charitable work. In that sense, the painting can be described as a work that satisfied the criteria of *decorum* in its own fashion.

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<sup>53</sup> *Tractates*, 57. Milovanovic and Szanto, *Poussin et Dieu*, 396–398.