THE EPISTLE

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This Month's Cover

In observance of the Feast of Saint Luke (October 18), our cover this month is *Saint Luke the Evangelist*, probably painted by Jacopo Pontormo. We say probably because it is not certain that he was the painter, although most art historians agree that it is likely that he Painted at least most of it. Completed c.1525, it is oil on wood. It is one of a set of four tondos with portraits of the Evangelists that are still there. They decorate the pendentives that once supported the cupola of the Cappella Capponi, Santa Felicità, Florence, Italy. Of the four paintings, the one of Saint John was certainly done by Pontormo, while Matthew and Mark were almost as certainly done by his apprentice Bronzino (Agnolo di Cosimo). Critics have argued for centuries as to how much of Saint Luke was done by Pontormo, and how much by Bronzino. The style and body positions of all four show a strong influence from their contemporary, Michelangelo.

Jacopo Carrucci (1494-1557) was born in Pontormo, Italy, from which he took his professional name. He was the son of a painter, Bartolommeo Carrucci. He first apprenticed to Leonardo da Vinci, although at the age of eighteen he left Leonardo's workshop and joined that of Andrea del Sarto. Though he was still just an apprentice, his work was praised by Michelangelo.[1] He departed from the High Renaissance style in which he was trained, and moved toward a more humanist style that represented the early stages of Mannerism. Although most of his paintings were of a religious nature, he was also noted as a portraitist. His diaries indicate that he was hypochondriac, and that he was a melancholy and introverted man, brooding over the slightest illnesses or insult. In his later years he became a recluse. He died in Florence in 1557, a lonely, paranoid and neurotic man, despite his high regard in the artistic world even in his own lifetime.

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[1] Michelangelo Buonarroti and Leonardo da Vinci had an intense dislike for each other throughout their whole lives.

A Word from the Editor

I recently attended an elegant banquet in an elegant setting. Shortly before people were seated, the servers placed on each table three small glasses, each containing a candle. Something about them appealed to me, and I wondered why. They served absolutely no practical purpose. The banquet room was well lit, so they contributed nothing to the lighting, and they had no value as providers of heat. Notwithstanding, they added significantly to the pleasant ambiance of the setting.

Psychologists say that we humans have genetic memories from the prehistoric past deeply embedded in our subconscious minds. One of these that goes back to our primitive origins is fire. Imagine a cave in the forest at the end of the last Ice Age 10,000 yeas ago. It is cold and dark outside, and you can hear among the trees the sounds of wild animals who would literally leap at the chance to have you for dinner. As you approach the cave, you can see the light inside and almost feel the warmth of the fires there. You step inside the cave and go over to the fire where your family is gathered. Someone is roasting meat on the embers, and you hear the sound of someone else singing the songs or telling the stories of your people. Imagine the sense of comfort and security that drives away the fear of being outside, alone in the cold darkness. This kind of racial memory is embedded in our subconscious mind, and it explains why we get such pleasure from a campfire, a hearth, or the flickering flames of a few tiny candles on a banquet table. People of every culture, place and time have loved gathering at the hearth or around a campfire. It is only since the advent of modern psychological research that we have had a glimmering of understanding as to why, but that does not make it any less true.

At the opening of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is Tevye's paean to Tradition. He says that it is tradition that keeps us balanced, and without it we would be as shaky as a fiddler on the roof. Tradition is the cultural version of a racial memory. It is passed from generation to generation, often for so long that its original purpose or meaning has been forgotten. That does not matter, however, because our traditions are nonetheless the cement that bonds us to one another and to the past. As Tevye says, they are what give us balance.

In the Church, as well as in our culture, we are in danger of losing many of our richest traditions. Modern Western culture is becoming so focused on individualism, doing what feels good, and expressing oneself in soundbites and memes, that the bonds of family unity, fraternalism and mutual responsibility are breaking down. With this

decay the cement that secures these bonds, tradition, is also disappearing. Once a tradition is abandoned it almost never returns, but is gone forever. It is true that we are better off without some of our old traditions, but it is also true that we are losing many that will leave us much poorer when they are gone. We must be careful to learn to recognize the difference between being hampered by tradition and being strengthened by it. Without tradition we weaken or even lose our contact with the past, and thus deplete our lives in the name of progress.

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Be Wordly Wise

Special

The Latin *specere*, to look or to seem, is a truly spec<u>ial</u> word in that it has spawned a plethora of English words. Most English words that contain the root -*spec*- are directly or indirectly derived from *specere*, including species, special, spectacle, specter, speculate, spectrum and specious, as well as aspect, respect, prospect, inspect and expect and, I suspect (yes, that one too), many more. They all have to do with appearances in one way or another. A species is a group of things that all appear to be alike; something is special when it appears to be unique or apart from the norm (special is an adjectival form of species: speci-al); something is specious when it appears to be valid, but underneath is inadequate or false. It is interesting to look at each of these words and try to determine what they have to do with something's appearance.

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The Book of Esther

People often ask why the Book of Esther is included in the Bible. It never once mentions God. Although God is not mentioned in it, if we read it carefully it is clear that the presence of God pervades every page of it. The story of Esther is the basis of the Jewish Feast of Purim, a spring festival that is one of joy and hope. It is said that Purim is the only feast in which God commands us to have a party. It is the story of Esther and her uncle Mordecai, who are Jewish exiles in the court of the Persian King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I). Most scholars agree that the story is allegorical, but is rooted in real people and real events. Many Jews held high positions in the Persian government after Persia defeated the Babylonians and freed their Jewish captives in 539 BC.

Nehemiah, who was sent by Artaxerxes I to rebuild Jerusalem, was one of the chief officials in Artaxerxes' court. Persian Jews were required to have Persian names. Historically, there really were four advisors to Cyrus and Xerxes named Marduka, and one of these is probably the Mordecai of the Bible. Esther's Hebrew name was Hadassah (Myrtle). Their Persian names, Mordecai and Esther, are derived from the chief Persian gods Marduk and Ishtar.

The biblical story says that Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) searched for the most beautiful woman in his empire to marry. Of all who were sent to him he chose Esther, not knowing that she was Jewish. This was critical, because her son's right to inherit the throne would be challenged if he were not a full-blooded Persian. It was apparently a happy marriage, although by Persian law no one, including the queen, could approach the king without his permission, under penalty of death. Haman, the highest official in the court, hated the Jews. He was probably jealous because so many had risen to high government positions over the years. He devised a plot to have all the Jews in the empire accused of conspiring against Xerxes, and to have them condemned and executed. Mordecai learned of this plot and went to his niece Esther, telling her that she was the only one who could get Xerxes to intervene and save the Jews. This was extremely dangerous for several reasons. She risked her life if she approached Xerxes without his permission. Making the appeal to him would have risked revealing to him that she was a Jew, and even though she was the queen, a woman accusing a trusted high official risked execution if she could not prove her charge. Xerxes had put away his previous queen just for disobeying a vile and unreasonable order that he gave when he was drunk.

Understanding her fear, Mordecai said, "If you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:14). The story gets a bit complicated here, but in essence Esther approached the king and was forgiven for doing so without permission. When he was convinced of the plot, Xerxes executed Haman, gave the Jews even more freedom and honor than before, and elevated Mordecai to the highest position in his court, the one that Haman had previously held.

As we observed above, God is never mentioned in the book, yet the sense that he was present, active and guiding the events echoes through the whole story. There is enough in the story to indicate that

while it is obviously highly elaborated, it may well be rooted in an actual historical event. Even if not, the writer was clearly very familiar with the Persian court, and the story serves as an important parable of the presence and protection of God even in times of trouble. It is for this reason that the Book of Esther has for millennia been accepted as Sacred Scripture, was included in the Jewish and Christian Bibles, and is the foundation of a joyful Jewish festival.

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Solomon, Socrates and Aristotle

One of the sites in the excavation of Pompeii is known as the House of the Physician. Its owner was almost certainly a wealthy physician, but other than that, little is known about him. In his house, however, was an extraordinary painting that has now been removed, and is displayed in the *Museo Nazionale* in Naples. It is extraordinary for two reasons. First, it is one of the earliest known paintings of a story from the Bible, dating to sometime shortly before Pompeii's destruction by an eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79. Secondly, while it depicts a story of Solomon's wisdom (1 Kings 3:16–28), two of the figures in it appear to be the Greek philosophers Socrates and Aristotle. There is no other clue in the house as to whether its owner was a pagan, a Christian, or a Hellenized Jew. Many educated Romans were familiar with the Jewish scriptures.[1] There are several literary references to them dating back to long before the Christian era that show great respect for Jewish wisdom and moral law. Some Gentiles were what were called God-fearers. They embraced the Jewish moral and ethical standards without observing the ceremonial law. It is also possible that the owner was a Christian, although this is less likely. There were many Christians in Pompeii at the time of its destruction, but they were still looked on as a strange and suspicious sect, and although possible, it is not very probable that a Christian would have succeeded as a physician in a Roman city at that time. He could also have been a Hellenized Jew. Hellenized Jews were Jews who had accepted much of Greek culture, and there were many in Pompeii. While Jewish law forbade the depiction of the human form

[1] Many New Testament books had not yet been written, and those that had were known mainly only to Christians. The Jewish scriptures were well known to educated Romans in their Greek translation, the Septuagint. Neither the Jewish nor Christian Bibles would be canonized until centuries later.

in art, the Hellenized Jews were much less concerned about that. Also, the presence of Socrates and Aristotle in the painting, if indeed that is who they are, would be consistent with Hellenized tastes. Hellenized Jews were particularly fond of Aristotle because he was Alexander the Great's teacher and mentor for many years. Most scholars, however, believe that the physician was simply a well-educated Roman who appreciated the Jews' stories of Solomon's wisdom.

The painting depicts the two women who appealed to Solomon's judgment. Both had babies, and during the night one rolled over on her baby and it died. Each claimed the surviving baby as her own and appealed to Solomon to decide who was the real mother. He said that he had no way of knowing, so he ordered that the baby be cut in half, and a half given to each woman. One said that this was fair, and the other cried out that she relinquished her claim, and that the baby should be given to the first. Solomon determined that the one who would not see her baby destroyed was the true mother. In the painting are Solomon, the women and baby, several onlookers, and two men in front who are painted in much clearer detail than the other onlookers. One is the prototypical picture of Socrates, with his balding broad head, flat nose and thick curly beard; the other is the prototypical picture of Aristotle, with dark curly hair, a thin beard, and his chin resting on his hand in the position of a thinker. There can be little doubt that these were intended to represent the two great Greek philosophers.

This painting is not the only Judeo-Christian item found in Pompeii. There were many Jews and Christians in Pompeii, both slave and free, many of whom prophesied its destruction. Nine years earlier, in A.D. 70, Vespasian's son Titus, who was the general charged with putting down the Jewish rebellion, destroyed Jerusalem and razed the Temple. In A.D. 79 he succeeded his father as Emperor. Many predicted that God's retribution would fall on him and his realm. A few months later Pompeii was destroyed.[1] A graffito scratched into a plaster wall reads, "Sodom Gomora." It is unknown whether this was done as a prophecy, during the eruption, or by a survivor afterward, but it is clearly a biblical reference to God's moral judgment.

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[1] Titus died of a fever in AD 81 at the age of 41, after a reign of only slightly over two years. Christians and Jews both maintained that this, along with the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum, was God's punishment for his razing of Jerusalem and his destruction of the Temple.

The Five Doorposts in Solomon's Temple

Even though the books of Kings and Chronicles give us many details of King Solomon's Temple, there are still many unanswered questions. The Temple was divided into three chambers (1 Kg. 6-7). The Outer Court (*Ulam*, ולם) was a large open court where anyone could go, including women and Gentiles (although Gentiles were not made to feel at all welcome). The Inner Court (*Heikhal*, היכל) was where the sacrifices were offered, and only adult Jewish males could enter. The Inner Sanctuary (*Devir*, דבר) or Holy of Holies (*Qadosh Qadoshim*, קדש קדשים) was the sacred inner chamber where the Ark of the Covenant resided, and where no one could enter but the High Priest. According to 1 Kings 6:31, there were five doorposts (*mezuzoth*, מזוזות) at the entrance of the Holy of Holies.[1] This has been a puzzle for centuries. There is no evidence that pentagonal doors were ever used in the ancient Near East, or that there were multiple doors to the Holy of Holies. There is a possible answer, however. Archaeologists Madeleine Mumcuoglu and Yosef Garfinkel discovered a temple at Khirbet Qeiyafa that had three (or possibly four) interlocked doorframes surrounding a single door at the entrance to its sacred inner chamber. Several similar doors have been found in temples in the eastern Mediterranean regions, and it appears that the number of interlocking doorframes signifies how sacred the chamber is. It seems that in Solomon's Temple, the entrance to the outer court had three such interlocking frames, the inner court had four, and the Holy of Holies five. While the word *mezuzah* normally means lintel or doorpost, it is likely that in the description of the Temple it meant a complete doorframe. We cannot be positive, but this seems a likely answer to the riddle of the five *mezuzoth* (doorposts) of the Holy of Holies.

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The Primary Symbol of Christianity

Christianity is rife with symbolism, yet the one symbol that is universally recognized as the sign of the Christian Faith is the cross. It was not always so. In fact, there was a time when almost everyone, Christian and non-Christian alike, was so repulsed by the concept of

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[1] The singular is *mezuzah* (מזוזה). The common meaning of it today is a small cartridge containing a scroll of passages from Torah. Most observant Jews place one on the doorpost of the entrance to their house (Deut. 6: 9).

crucifixion that even the very word "cross" (Latin *crux*) was considered so repugnant that "nice" people would not even say it.[1] The word was every bit as offensive as any modern vulgar four-letter word is today. Any image of a cross was equally offensive. A vulgar curse was "*Ire ad crucem*" ("Go to a cross" or "Go get crucified"). This was roughly equivalent to "Go to hell," but was much more crude.

The Romans did not invent crucifixion. No one is certain of its origin, but most scholars believe that it was first used as a punishment in Persia (modern Iran) in about the 6th century BC. The Romans used it sparingly at first, but by the second century BC they had honed it to an unimaginable level of brutality, by which it could sometimes take days for the victim to die in prolonged excruciating pain. It was originally used as a punishment only for slaves, traitors and rebels. No Roman citizen was subject to it, regardless of his crime.[2] A slave, on the other hand, could be crucified for anything at all, even for spilling some wine or accidentally pulling her mistress's hair while combing it.[3] Because of the horror and humiliation of crucifixion, the elite were protected from it. It was never mentioned in polite conversation, especially in the presence of women and children. In most cases they

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[1] When I was a boy, cancer had a stigma so great that "nice" people would not say the word. They would whisper "c" or say something to the effect of, "She has ..." (pausing with knowing scowl) "... well, you know."

[2] Not every Roman was a citizen. Citizenship was hereditary, but usually only the higher classes held it. It could be conferred on others as an honor or reward. We do not know how Paul came by his citizenship, but most likely it was conferred on one of his ancestors for some service to Rome. Women could not be citizens, but the female family members of a citizen were granted the same legal protections. It is tradition that Peter died by crucifixion, but Paul, being a Roman citizen, was beheaded instead. One of Cicero's most famous trials was the prosecution of a former governor of Sicily, Gaius Verres, for having a criminal, one Publius Gavius, flogged and crucified even though he had claimed Roman citizenship. Verres was convicted, and spent the rest of his life in exile.

[3] Masters had full power over their slaves. They could abuse, beat or torture them at will, and did not even have to answer for their deaths. Most masters treated their slaves relatively decently (at least by the standards of the time), but some were notably brutal. The greatest protection that a slave had was the fact that that he represented a considerable financial investment. Slaves were financially valuable property. In today's money, a young healthy male, especially if he were educated, could sell for several thousand dollars.

were not even exposed to hearing about it, much less actually seeing a crucifixion. By the time of the Principate (the period of the emperors), the culture had become much more hardened, and people were less squeamish about it. Even then, however, open discussion about it and using the word *crux* were still taboo. Crucifixion was meant as a deterrent to slaves and criminals, so it was usually carried out where only they would see it, away from the eyes of genteel people.[1] While this was true throughout the Empire, it was far less so in the provinces than in Rome itself. Provincials were looked down upon as ignorant "country bumpkins" with little sensitivity to such things. This is why no one was shocked when Jesus and the two rebels were crucified right out in the open outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Because of the taboo on writing about or even mentioning crucifixion, most of what we know about it is by inference or from archaeological research. Rather than the cross as we normally think of it (Latin Cross), it is far more likely that a T-shaped cross (Tau Cross) was used. The upright would already be secured in the ground, and the victim was either tied or nailed to the cross-piece, which he was forced to carry from the judgment place to the place of crucifixion. He was then hoisted up and the cross-piece was dropped into a notch at the top of the upright. His feet were then tied or nailed to the upright, one on each side. The body was usually left on the cross until it rottted and fell off, or was eaten by birds and wild animals. Often, because of their value, they would remove the nails from the feet after the victim was dead, so they could re-use them.[2] The oldest known

[1] A notable exception was after the defeat of Spartacus's slave rebellion in 71 BC. Crassus and Pompey crucified 6,000 slaves, lining the Appian Way with crosses from Capua to Rome (over 100 miles). For millennia Romans lived in constant fear of slave revolts, since they were outnumbered by their slaves. By law, if a slave even attempted to kill his master, every slave in the household, including women and children, was crucified. Among the very rich, a household of seven or eight people might have well over a hundred slaves. For this reason, they were willing to tolerate the public crucifixion of the Spartacans as a deterrent to another revolt.

[2] The nailing at the side is confirmed by ancient graffiti and the recent discovery of the skeleton of a crucifixion victim. The nail is still in the anklebone, and was driving into its side. It was left there because it bent over when it was driven, and could not be removed from the bone. The traditional image of the feet being nailed together in front goes back no earlier than Late Antiquity.

images of the cross or of crucifixion indicate a Tau cross rather than the later Latin one. Graffiti were very common in Roman cities, and were vulgar at least as often as they are today. Archaeologists have uncovered one of a slave worshiping a crucified jackass, obviously intended as an insult to Christians.

All this raises the question, of course, if crucifixion was such a taboo to decent people, how did the Cross become the primary Christian symbol? The answer is that at first it was not. Paul wrote, "We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23). It was a stumbling-block to the Jews, because "anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23). The cross was frequently referred to as a tree. How could anyone who was cursed by God be God?[1] It was foolishness to the Gentiles. Much ancient mythology told of the deaths of gods, but it was always at the hand of other gods, either through treachery or in some heavenly battle. Worshiping someone who had died a slave's death at the hands of humans made no sense to them.

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A Touch of Trivia

Anciently, salt was so valuable it was almost sacred. Mining it was dangerous, and extracting it from the sea was expensive and highly labor-intensive. It is essential to life, and for thousands of years it was a primary means of preserving foods. It was so valuable that it was often used as part of a Roman soldier's pay. The Latin for salt is *sal*, from which we get the word salary. It was used ritually in almost all sacrifices, both Jewish and pagan. Jesus told his disciples, "You are the salt of the earth" (Mat. 5:13). This did not mean that they were common, but rather that they were precious and could change the "flavor" of the world. To this day many Christian traditions place a few grains of salt on the baby's tongue as part of the rite of baptism, symbolic of purifying his speech as a Christian. Because of the importance of salt, spilling it is considered a bad omen. In Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Judas has spilled a saltcellar.

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Depression is merely anger without enthusiasm.

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[1] Paul explains this in many passages. See Gal. 3:13.