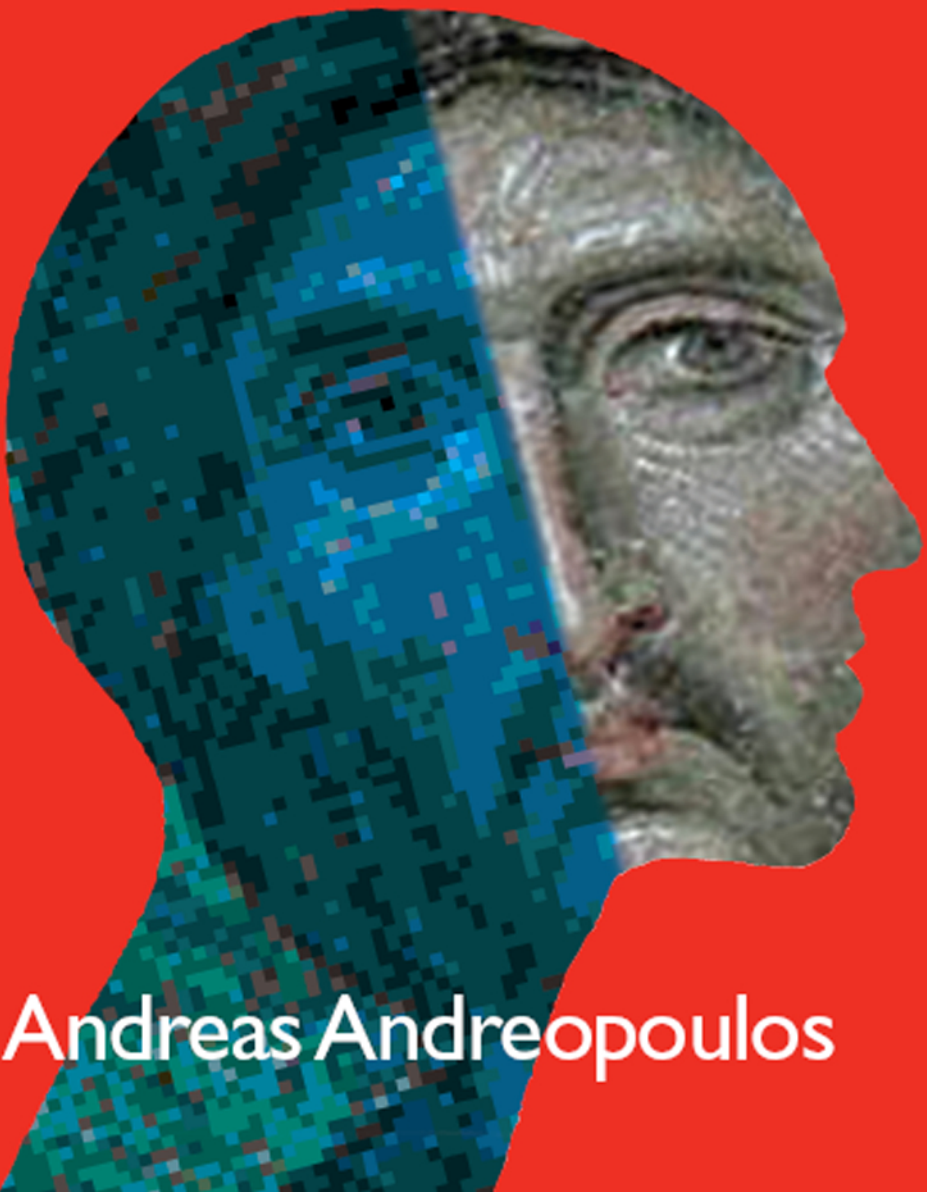
CROSS CULTURAL THEOLOGIES

Art as Theology

From the Postmodern to the Medieval



Andreas Andreopoulos

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Cross Cultural Theologies

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FROM THE POSTMODERN TO THE MEDIEVAL

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Introduction

The original idea for the present study was conceived about ten years ago in Toronto. Then it was a sketch for a dissertation at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. The path that led to its completion at the Theology Department of the University of Durham, UK, under Fr Andrew Louth, was certainly not full of the kind of intellectual and spiritual tribulation that one is thankful for, in hindsight. To be sure, no one would be more surprised than me if by any magical way I were to get a glimpse of the future back in 1994 or 1995, and see myself working in the field of Theology. From the beginning I was aware that I did not know where the examination of art I was attempting would take me, but I had trusted and accepted the fact that *something* within me, a part of my thought, hidden from my conscious self, claimed a deeper and clearer knowledge of my purpose, and would gradually lead me there. I could only place my trust in this something and accept the fact that this work would require more than academic dedication and systematic study.

From the beginning I had a double approach towards art. Working as a musician for the last ten years, it was not enough to examine art as a theoretical, abstract phenomenon of cultural importance; my direct experience was too strong to permit me to proceed in this manner. On the other hand, the practice of art experienced from the inside, whether it happened to be commercial or classical, proved to be a constant intellectual stimulus for me, and it often motivated me to find additional perspectives in the problems of contemporary art, the role of the artist and, generally, the function of art. Beyond my own experience as a musician, I was lucky enough, or rather privileged, to be surrounded by accomplished artists immensely better than myself, who faced similar intellectual challenges in their work, and to be able to participate vicariously in their concerns, their problems and their insight. I should mention here my late friend Charis Polatos, who died in a tragic car accident on the 8th of May 1992. A self-taught musician, who covered almost all genres of music with his extraordinary talent, Charis was showing me in his way why art matters, through his incessant exploration of the possibilities of art. Although he had educated himself in classical music, he had no connection to the academic artistic establishment; he did not even have a formal musical training. Yet, he had an amazingly direct connection to art itself. Music for him was a language he knew extremely well, that gave him the ability to express anything, even feelings, concepts and ideas for which verbal language and thought does not have the vocabulary. What was unique about

him, and has immensely influenced my personal quest, was that his approach to the issues and the concerns of contemporary music and art was completely guileless; he was never interested in making a name for himself, and he never sought any kind of recognition for his many contributions. In a way I often think of Charis as a saint of art, and my poor attempt to understand and sketch the dimensions of his talent is not truly doing justice to his memory.

The other path of inquiry, my academic development, was quite unusual. My undergraduate interests included studies in psychology and education, as well as a cinema studies programme with a strong basis in semiotics. It was, perhaps, because of the combination of art, semiotics and psychology that my research methods still resemble the methods of a creative psychoanalyst; it is not enough for me to accept things at face value, and I always feel compelled to analyze them further, to discover deeper meanings and hidden subtexts, and to attempt unexpected connections. In addition to this, during my graduate studies I had started trying to integrate my artistic experience into my studies, and the person who was most helpful to me was Dr Ronald Silvers from the department of Sociology in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, a phenomenologist as well as an art photographer. My thought became more personal and more indebted to a process of synthesis, but what was more interesting was that the act of writing itself evolved into an introspective research for me, as it was essential to acknowledge my personal biases or influences and then attack them or build upon them. How was all that possible through the study of art?

The tension between my professional experience and my academic education was somehow beneficial for both, as they became something like a testing ground for each other. I was facing every day most of the problems of contemporary art, both commercial and classical. Such a problem was the opposition between classical and commercial art and their respective social answerability. Several state channels, such as arts councils, are called to fund and promote or deny any assistance to ensembles of contemporary classical art. Increasingly shrinking budgets in the 90s in Canada and the USA placed the future of the support for the arts, and in some cases the arts themselves, in grave danger. This was a reality I witnessed daily as friends of mine and people I knew were losing their jobs from classical orchestras or state-supported ensembles, or were in dire financial straits because their work used to depend heavily on state grants which were being curtailed. It seemed it was increasingly difficult to be a classical artist. Larger-scale phenomena were also showing how contemporary life can be hard on the arts: certain arts organizations, music, opera and ballet companies could not cope with the new reality, and declared bankruptcy. On the other hand, how could it be possible to

isolate the financial problems of the arts from a larger tumultuous economy that, recently, led to the reduction of the number of hospitals in Ontario, and toughened welfare regulations? Who could really decide that the arts should survive, if the price has to be paid by the already suffering lower socioeconomic strata, which may not have a taste for classical art anyway?

Popular commercial art, on the other hand, was facing entirely different kinds of problems. The commercial system itself is not threatened at all; in fact it is hard to say whether big corporations who control the arts industry, especially the music and movie industries, have ever been so powerful before. Popular art cannot be reduced to its commercial aspect that easily, however. The fact that it was able to sustain itself and thrive in difficult times is an indication of a corresponding genuine demand for it. The problem is that for many years, mostly because of its success and the commercial machine that supported it, popular art had remained conceptually stagnant. It had succumbed to the process of industrial planning to such a degree that commercial art, conforming to the formal criteria that allow the art industry to repeat a successful formula over and over in music, the movies and television – traditionally the most lucrative arts – is not necessarily genuinely popular anymore, at least not in the deeper meaning of the word.

How was I to understand the problem of the duality of culture? It was rather obvious to me that both classical and popular art had equally valid contributions to make. I had to understand more about their nature in order to understand what was happening to them. I chose to employ a gaze from without, corresponding to semiotic analysis, and a gaze from within, corresponding to phenomenology. Both routes finally led me to a quasi-psychoanalytical approach and methodology: first as the extension of the examination of *what is* and how it relates to human nature; second as the introspective examination of my own motivation and my fascination with it, as a performer.

The methodological problem was quite difficult to deal with. By the time I attempted the first sketches of the study I had discovered and had come to accept two things: first that the study was a lot more unpredictable than I had initially anticipated and was transforming in front of my eyes as I was attempting to penetrate its elusive object, and second that my personal motives themselves had to be researched because they, although only gradually revealed to me, were more responsible for the study than any purely academic choices I had made.

Art became more than an object of examination; it became a research method and a way of knowing. In many ways, as my experience showed me, a part of artistic communication takes place in the space of the unspeakable and the unnamable, codifying a kind of knowledge that eludes

the systematic rational classification of oral and (especially) written speech. This type of history is not that much evident in the representational arts, which can up to a point be analysed in terms of symbols and allusions; it is even less evident in literature which relies largely on the subtle combinations of meaning and expression, because the very medium of those arts is, in both cases, dissectable, but it is quite different in music, which is the area my active rapport with art has mainly taken place in. Music, perhaps more than the other arts, cannot be easily interpreted in terms of ideas. Ultimately, every kind of musical rule or established tradition eludes rational analysis more easily than in, say, poetry, whose words can be mined for a symbolic meaning that can sometimes reveal rational structures. Claude Debussy used to say characteristically that the rules are not important in music; in fact there are no rules, what matters is only "pleasure".

As a professional musician I was intrigued by the success of a relatively new kind of music, which was usually grouped with new, and sometimes unusual – as in the case of the music of Hildegard von Bingen – recordings of medieval and early Renaissance music. The choir of the Benedictine monks of Santo Domingo de Silos, Gorecki's *Symphony No. 3*, the music of Arvo Pärt and John Tavener, and also explorations of popular music into tradition (found, for example, in the music of Dead Can Dance, Ross Daly, Loreena McKennitt, etc.), elicited a response that baffled music critics and academics. This emerging music culture is defined by a few things: a spiritual ambience, a very simple and unemotional, yet somehow intense, quality of sound, and an occasional echo of distant, half-forgotten cultural memories, consisting of the use of medieval instruments, voice arrangements reminiscent of Byzantine or early Western choirs, references to medieval and early Renaissance sources of reference, etc. I was rather suspicious of the "spirituality" of this artistic generation, because it was initially grouped with the flaky Kitsch of the New Age (which I could perhaps see as an interesting sociological movement, but certainly not as an artistic one). It seems that professional musicians and music academics could not accept this music as easily as the audiences, and to a great degree they still cannot. I found this intriguing, especially as I became more familiar with the new music. Could it be possible that it was actually successful because it was religious?

At the same time, the decline of the arts everywhere else, and my own puzzlement about the answerability of art and the question of the existence of high culture in a world with great social problems, seemed to create a very interesting background for the new religious art. Here we are at a time of financial recession, when government support for the arts has dried up, perhaps understandably so, yet out of nowhere a new kind of high art has appeared, one that can support itself, and also address

some of the most profound questions that have appeared in mainstream art since the Middle Ages. The concept of the "death of art", as it is presented here, was formulated within my thought by this contrast.

The "death of art" is a question and a proposed hypothesis. The premise behind it is based on the postmodern condition, as it is expressed in (the philosophy of) art: what we experience in the visual arts, literature, and music, is the end of the formal history of the arts. There is no solemn declaration of such an auspicious idea anywhere; it can be perhaps inferred from the discourse on postmodernity, the collapse of the "grand narratives" and the re-emergence of ethnic and religious traditions all over the world, found in the writings of philosophers such as Foucault and Lyotard, but it is not a point that has to be proven scientifically, at least as far as art is concerned. Art without geographical borders, the success of institutions and organizations, such as WOMAD, which promote the influx of ethnic music into Western culture, and many other examples, can be observed daily. The notion of an artistic tradition that develops in a more or less linear fashion, not unlike science, even with occasional stimuli from another culture, has been practically abandoned. At the same time, "originality" has been reduced to a great degree to a choice among a number of cultural styles. Postmodernity in art is practically synonymous with wide eclecticism and a return of the traditional. A phenomenon of our time, it is absolutely possible and not surprising to see an Arab taxi driver in Paris or New York listening to Russian medieval hymns arranged with flamenco guitars or synthesizers, or perhaps with both. The end of formal history of art does not mean that there is no development in art whatsoever; it just means that the concept of art has been as distanced from the formal history that used to account for the shape and evolution of Western art, popular and classical, in the same way the Western concept of history (starting with the Greeks and including Marxism) has been distanced from the postmodern relativism which opposes the identification of the development of the human species with the history of white educated men.

I have to add here that there is a reason for the examination of medieval painting and contemporary music in this study. My initial interest and my first observations about the "death of art" came almost exclusively from the area of music. It would be fruitful to examine the other arts in this context as well, and this is one way to pursue the object of this study even further, but I think that music is a quite good example of the phenomenon of the death of art, perhaps because it can combine immense popularity with as sophisticated tradition as any of the fine arts, and thus cover the entire social spectrum. Issues such as the popular and the classical, as well as the sacred and the profane, can be observed very easily in contemporary music. On the other hand, the theory of sacred art can be

found mostly in the history of representational arts, as well as in literature. Issues like the representation of God in the Jewish and the Christian tradition have repeatedly defined the role of sacred art. Trying to connect contemporary art with medieval sacred art, and music with iconography, was not without precedent: several contemporary artists very often refer to their musical works as "icons in sound", suggesting that there can be a common basis for music and painting, in a way that reveals their possibility to express the sacred.

My academic question could be expressed simply as that: "What lies at the end of formal art history, which we are experiencing at the age of postmodernity?" And my hypothesis, born out of intuition, but also from the observation of, and perhaps faith in, the new religious classical culture, is: "The death of art as we know it, and its reincarnation as a spiritual practice: something that, in different ways, was part of medieval aesthetics".

I felt I was lacking something in my academic approach. I could not approach spirituality as an uninvolved observer, and my profession as a musician made it more difficult for me to (want to) be "objective". I was familiar with the discourse of subjectivity within contemporary culture and criticism, perhaps even with its metaphysical extensions from a sociological and philosophical point of view, but, having been educated within a scientific academic framework that praises the objectivity of knowledge and the distance of the researcher from his object of study, save for some writings inspired by phenomenology, I had never expected my own subjectivity to enter the picture. My convictions, my social and moral responsibility as an artist, and my faith, were becoming part of what I was studying; spiritual art has no meaning without them. I discovered that I could not continue my study under my former academic guidelines. Sociology and philosophy could not easily provide a framework that would include the spiritual self. A leap of faith was necessary: I decided to change the field of my study and continue my research in theology. It is a choice I have never regretted.

The shift to theology would not mean that my academic methods would be radically changed. Theology was a safety valve for me, once I had realized that in my working hypothesis art is the transient and spirituality the timeless. I felt safer knowing that my arguments could be measured against the tradition of the study of the spiritual, and I felt freer knowing that I could extend my thought to the roots of our social and psychological background. Art in my research was becoming, as perhaps it was also the case with the new religious art, the pretext to enter something much more important, which one could get to only by sacrificing what led one there: This is what the "death of art" stands for.

1 A Religious View of the History of the Arts

The origin of the arts can be traced to the book of Genesis, where we read that Jubal, the son of Lamech, "was the ancestor of all those who play the lyre and the pipe".[1] The other two sons of Lamech, Jabal and Tubal, contributed to the history of civilization by inventing herding and metalworking. The following chapter of the book of Genesis presents a genealogy after Adam that differs somewhat from the genealogy of chapter 4, and without an account of the introduction of the arts and crafts. Lamech was born six generations after Adam according to Genesis 4, and eight according to Genesis 5. Genesis 6 presents the account of the enigmatic Nephilim or Nephthalim who were born of the "daughters of the people" and the "sons of God". Admittedly, the canonical Bible is, sometimes, quite confusing about the number of generations after Adam, but this does not diminish the power and the significance of the events it describes. As far as the introduction of the arts and crafts is concerned, and for the purposes of the present study the introduction of the arts specifically, we could wish to have some more information. For this reason we may examine other sources that describe those events with more details, perhaps giving more weight to their theological significance.

According to an early source of Judeo-Christian history, the origin of art can somehow be related causally to the Fall of the angels. The pseudepigraphon, yet highly respected, *Book of Enoch* mentions that some dissident angels, led by Samiazaz, taught the arts and the sciences to the human race, a story that may correspond to the account of the descent of the "sons of God" into humanity, in Genesis 6. It was because of those actions of theirs that they were expelled from Paradise and subsequently became known as the fallen angels. Art then, according to this version, was either an invention of Satan (although we do not have any proof for this argument, as those angels were at the side of God when they taught the arts to the people), or a present from God, something to make life on Earth easier after the expulsion from Paradise.[2] This idea is corroborated by the other end of the religious human trajectory in this tradition, the book of Revelation. In one of the last eschatological stages, just before the marriage of the Lamb to the Woman, we are told that the "voice of the minstrels and the pipers and the musicians stops and will never be heard again".[3] The entire story of the Fall and the creation of New Jerusalem in Heaven indicates something we could have suspected anyway:

our present inability to accept the world in our present, imperfect condition, without a need for a parallel reality, such as the one provided by art.

It is interesting to note, discussing the two events, that the participation of man in both cases seems only secondary. In the first case it is the angels who take the initiative to reveal to the humans the secrets of Heaven and Earth, all sorts of knowledge including astronomy and sorcery; and, in the second case, the eschatological drama takes place in the realm of the divine, after the entirety of human history has been traversed. Should we take this as an indication that human volition is not very important at the birth of history and at the eschatological conclusion of humanity? In that case one could argue that human history is a plaything between a benevolent God and a malevolent Devil, and man's actions make no difference whatsoever. On closer examination, however, we can see that the trajectory between the first and the last moment is almost entirely placed at the hands of humanity, even if it does not originate from within humanity, and the arts and sciences can be seen, from a theological perspective, as educational tools at the disposal of humanity, which can be used in order to fulfil their eschatology. Besides, we should not forget that the book of Revelation does not foreshadow the fate of humanity as a whole, but differentiates strongly between the fate of the just and the fate of the unjust, the ones who have worked towards their salvation, and the ones who have not. At any rate, the arts, regardless of their dubious origin and eschatology, are closely interrelated to both the conscious and the unconscious mind. Furthermore, they apply equally to the individual and to the collective. In this view it makes sense to treat the history of the arts as a metaphor (or as a symbolical procession) of human consciousness. It would then be useful to put aside the discussion of the theological implications of this issue for the moment and concentrate on the examination of the arts between the initial and the final moment of human history.

It is fascinating to note how the initial and the final boundary of human life on earth are connected with the existence, birth and death, of the arts. Regardless of whether we accept the arts as a result or a cause of the Fall of man or the Fall of the angels, we can be sure that they are of no use whatsoever in the paradisal state of existence. Moreover, the exclusion of art and artists from Paradise or Utopia is by no means particular to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Several classifications of the citizens of a state give the artist a very low social standing. In a classification from sixth century Byzantium which divided the civilian part of society into ten groups, the artists (charioteers, actors, musicians) rank at the bottom, even below the servants and the useless (the old, the infirm and the insane).[4] Aristotle accepted, somewhat reluctantly, the usefulness of artists and artisans in his *Politics*, but refused to admit them as full citizens,

whereas Plato in the *Republic* banished them in principle from his ideal utopian state, allowing for martial and religious art only. This example demonstrates, however, that even in the rational Greek tradition where the artists did not enjoy a very respectable status, there was an implicit distinction between religious art, as we would understand it today, and secular art. Religious rituals had little to do with the secular art of the time.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, on the other hand, the character and the function of the arts was predominantly religious from the beginning. It would be interesting to divide this tradition into several stages and study the importance of art and its connection to religion in each stage. One should keep in mind, however, that a full analysis of the evolution of the arts in a religious context would be a titanic undertaking, worthy of a lifetime of study, and could certainly not be exhausted or developed in one book. What I hope to do in this chapter is to comment on certain instances where the artistic was particularly indebted, inspired or drawn by the religious, in an ontological rather than decorative manner. By no means should the examples I present be regarded as the only or the stronger ones *vis-à-vis* the ontological relationship of art and religion. I have tried, however, to select instances that correspond to characteristic stages in the development of art and of religious consciousness. Moreover, I have limited this analysis to the Judeo-Christian tradition, which was also influenced by Greek thought. In a somewhat simplistic way, I tend to detect two contrasting modes in the religious feeling of an era or a people: one takes the universe as a place with two distinct realms with not much interaction between them, whereas the other accepts that the division between the tangible and the transcendental is more or less temporary, and not as prohibitive. This is very important for the study of art, because the distinction and union between two different realms is as much a question of religion as it is of art. This book attempts to capitalize on this striking similarity between art and religion in various ways, whether what is discussed includes the physical and the metaphysical, left- and right-brain thought, Heidegger's *Welt* and *Erde*, or popular and classical art.

Somewhat arbitrarily, and not always corresponding to historical truth, but certainly not without good reason, in this chapter I locate the first mode primarily within ancient Greek culture, where the pantheon of the Olympian gods was anthropomorphic to such a degree that it was far removed from what we could call metaphysical; especially within Platonic tradition, the realm of the gods does not necessarily coincide with the highest degree of existence. The *Ev* (One) of Plotinus is not at all anthropomorphic, and even if it were, it would have to be thought of as a distant god, a *deus otiosus* rather than as a God-Father.

Conversely, I identify the second mode with Jewish monotheism. The exclusive relationship of Yahweh with his people, and also the Messianic

promise, a feature that is amplified even further in Christianity and its eschatology, express something completely different from the rigid division between the physical and the metaphysical of Greek culture.

As noted above, this generalization has to be taken with a grain of salt, for the sake of the argument. The goal of this book is to investigate the condition of contemporary art and its particular rapport with spirituality and religion, and the present chapter wishes to explore the archaeology of religious art, examine some of the critical stages it has gone through, and perhaps contribute something to our contemporary understanding of art. It should not be taken as a presumptuous attempt to exhaust the study of the development of religious art. As it will be discussed later in detail, art can work in two fundamentally opposite ways: it can either create little autonomous parallel universes or, in a function not essentially too different from the function of religion, it can attempt to transcend the fragmentation of the universe and assist us in bridging the gap between the two worlds. I think the two ways correspond to the two opposed ways of religious practice mentioned above, and this is why I used this generalization.

The Religious Background of Art in the Jewish Tradition and in Greek Philosophy

In many ways Judaism is a tradition of words. Representation of God is strictly prohibited, representation of other beings is, often, suspicious. The *Torah* is the word of God, and the Ten Commandments are the legacy of the Supreme Being given directly to the Jewish people. The Word of the Bible is what kept these people together through centuries of diaspora. It would be possible to argue that the books of the Bible constitute a form of art, but the boundaries between artistic creation and pure history, or divine legislation, are unclear in most cases. What is more, rabbinic tradition attaches a symbolical meaning to the words that can be correctly interpreted only through the prism of theology. Nobody can deny the artistic dimensions of books like the Song of Songs, yet even what seems just another beautiful poem to the uninitiated, can assume immense symbolical extensions for the initiate. A short phrase from the Song of Songs, such as "Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am sick with love"[5] may seem like an inspired verse of erotic poetry, with an aesthetic intent, to anyone not familiar with Jewish symbolism. It can have quite a few interpretations within the context of biblical exegesis, though: