

## SAGGIO

**Bronzino's *Christ's Descent into Limbo*:  
*Populus, qui sedebat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam***

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In 1552, the Florentine painter and poet Agnolo Bronzino (1503–1572) was commissioned to paint *Christ's Descent into Limbo* for the chapel of Giovanni Zanchini in Santa Croce in Florence. The painting draws inspiration from the Scriptures (Gospel of Nicodemus), Italian poets (Boccaccio, Petrarca, and Dante Alighieri), and the theological musician Fra Silvano Razzi. In *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, Bronzino skilfully integrated portraits of Old Testament figures, ancient poets, and contemporary Florentine artists. Bronzino's painting showcases his artistic talent by blending literary and visual components well, resulting in a captivating and profound work of art. Bronzino's painting reveals his creative talent by masterfully combining literary and visual elements, resulting in beautiful and insightful artwork.

In this essay, I aim to delve into the characters' identities depicted in the painting by analysing its iconography and comparing it with various sacred and profane texts. The essay comprises two sections: first, an examination of the painting's iconography, and second, an analysis of the sources from Scripture, poetry, sermons, and religious music used to identify the characters in the painting.

**Keywords:** Christian iconography, Borghini, Bronzino, Dante, Razzi, Vasari, Santa Croce

### Iconography of the Painting

Bronzino's *Christ's Descent in Limbo* was completed in 1552 for the chapel of Giovanni Zanchini in Santa Croce in Florence, now in the Novitiate Medici Chapel (**Figure 1**).



Figure 1. Agnolo Bronzino, *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, 1552, oil on wood. Chapel of Giovanni Zanchini (Novitiate Medici Chapel). Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence. Photo credit: author.

The carved and gilded frame is attributed to Florentine Battista di Marco del Tasso (1500–1550). The painting is in oil on wood and measures 443 x 291 x 4 cm. On the sword held by Judith, the Old Testament heroine, there is an inscription with the date and signature, “MDLII [1552]/OPERA DEL/ BRONZINO/ FIOrentin].O. (**Figure 2**).



Figure 2. Agnolo Bronzino, Signature, det., *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, 1552, oil on wood. Chapel of Giovanni Zanchini (Novitiate Medici Chapel). Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence. Photo credit: author.

Unfortunately, the predella of this painting was lost in the flood of 1966 in Florence. The painting comprises several large, wooded pieces badly damaged during the flood but successfully restored (Cecchi, 1996).

On the frame, Bronzino inscribed a partial quotation from the Gospel of Matthew (4:16): “Populus, qui sedebat in tenebris, vidit lucem magnam: et sedentibus in regione umbræ mortis, lux orta est eis” (The people who were sitting in darkness have seen a great light. And unto those seated in the region of the shadow of death, a light has risen) (Figure 1).

The painting depicts the glorious appearance of the Resurrected Christ, with his triumph banner, dramatically entering Limbo, into the realm of the dead, where he liberated Old Testament fathers, patriarchs, and prophets. The figure of Christ in exaggerated contrapposto recalls Michelangelo's heroic images of Christ. The brilliant and vivid Mannerist colours create a serpentine movement throughout the composition, paralleling the actions of the nude figures. The colours selected for Mannerist compositions are genuinely captivating. Bronzino created a visually stimulating dynamic and energetic movement across the painting using lapis lazuli, emerald-green, lilac-violet, orange-red, and bone white colours. This virtuoso use of colour demonstrates his painterly skill and creativity. In the design of his remarkable figures, Bronzino quotes various poses from his mentor artists, namely Botticelli, Michelangelo, Rosso Fiorentino, and Pontormo.

The spatial composition, twisting movement of the figures, and brilliant colours bond with the ardour of the moment when Christ salvages the blessed souls of all ages and genders from Limbo. The Old Testament figures included Adam and Eve, Noah, Set, Isaiah, Simeon, David, Habakkuk, Micah, Enoch, Elijah, Jacob,

John the Baptist, and Judith, and with the addition of the good thief who was crucified at the same time of Christ.<sup>1</sup> The corners of the upper area of the painting depict Hell on the left and Heaven on the right. Hell is painted with fiery colours, where the devil is paralyzed by the divine action of Christ's freeing the blessed souls. Contrast with Heaven, depicted with celestial colours and a sunset atmosphere, forecasting a paradise for rescued souls.

In the *Life of Bronzino*, the Florentine art historian and artist Giorgio Vasari (1511–1547) praised the painting for its accurate representation of the naturalness in the portraits, personifying religious figures in the scene, including Pontormo, Giovanbattista Gelli, Bachiacca, Camilla Tedaldi, and Costanza da Sommaia. Vasari also admired the composition of beautiful nude figures (Vasari, 1968). In contrast, the Florentine humanist and art critic Raffaello Borghini (1537–1588), although elaborating on Vasari's description, criticised the nudity of the beautiful bodies as unsuitable for an altar in the church since nudity can elicit worldly thoughts (Borghini, 1730, pp. 84, 147, 438). Borghini reflected the sentiments of decorum decreed by the Counter-Reformation, unlike Vasari who praised Bronzino's *enargeia* (Bosch, 2020, 1, n. 4).<sup>2</sup>

Numerous scholars (e.g., Matteoli, Gaston, Falciani, and Zeigler) have identified the individuals portrayed in the painting. I defer to their identifications. Moreover, their research sheds light on the relationship and business links between Giovanni Zanchini, who commissioned the painting from Bronzino, and Giovanni da Sommaia, whose niece Maddalena married Zanchini's son in 1559. This information is crucial for comprehending the historical significance of the artwork (Vasari, 1968; Zeigler, 2013, p. 85).

Based on my research, I have confidently identified several figures in the painting by consulting sacred and profane texts.

## Significant Sources for the Identification of the Personages

### A. Scriptural Sources

After carefully examining Bronzino's *Descent into Limbo*, I have developed an interpretation of the personages depicted in the painting and their relationships with each other. Several scriptural texts, including the First Letter of Peter, the Apostle's Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and The Gospel of Nicodemus, Descent to Hell, first influenced my assessment.

Christ's descent into Limbo was mentioned in the First Letter of Peter (3:18–20). It noted that Christ visited the captive souls in spirit without his mortal

<sup>1</sup> For the identification of the figures in Bronzino's painting, see Gaston, 1969, pp. 281–316; Falciani, 2010, pp. 277–293; Zeigler, 2013, pp. 81–106.

<sup>2</sup> Here is the definition as “vividness, the power of language to create a vivid presence intimately connected to the emotions of the interpreter/receiver [or creator].”

body. The letter further states, “Because Christ also died once for all for sins, just for the unjust, to lead you back to God; [...] And in his spirit He went to bring the announcement also to the captive souls, who had once refused to believe in His magnanimity...” (1 Peter 3:18-20). A second passage in this letter repeats the good news to the dead about Christ's journey into the underworld: “But they will give an account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. The good news was proclaimed to the dead so they may live according to God in spirit despite their physical death” (1 Peter 4:5-6). Bronzino visualized this passage and not John's *Apocalypse*, where Christ's descent into Limbo is not described, but his death and travel to Hell is: “I was dead, but now I live forever and have power over death and Hell” (Rev. 1:18).

In this painting, Bronzino continues to be inspired by the Apostles' Creed, like in *The First Letter of Peter*, which notes a descent of Christ “under the Earth,” (Philippians 2:10) using the phrase “He [Christ] descended into Hell”<sup>3</sup> (**Figure 4**).



Figura 4. Agnolo Bronzino, *Christ, det, Christ's Descent into Limbo*, 1552, oil on wood.

The Apostles' Creed, also known as the Symbol of the Apostles and as The Prayer of the Twelve Apostles, composed by the Apostles, was and is commonly recited in the Roman Catholic liturgy during the Holy Mass.

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<sup>3</sup> The Apostles' Creed was first cited by Saint Ambrose in a Letter to Pope Siricius during the Milanese Synod in 393. See <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/apostles-creed> (accessed 15 August 2023).

Another scriptural source, perhaps problematic, with a similar interpretation is the Athanasian Creed, traditionally attributed to Saint Athanasius (295–373), thus tracing back to the third and fourth centuries although the date and origin are controversial. Saint Athanasius commented that Christ, the Son of God, is God and human [...] He suffered for our salvation, descended into Hell, and rose from the dead on the third day.”<sup>4</sup>

Bronzino’s *Christ’s Descent into Limbo* visualizes another scriptural passage as well, The Gospel of Nicodemus, Descent into Hell (VI, 1): “Then the holy patriarchs and prophets began to recognize each other, and each spoke of his prophecies” (Gospel of Nicodemus, Descent into Hell, VI:1)<sup>5</sup>. According to this passage, Limbo is where the patriarchs and prophets—the righteous ones—who died before the Resurrection of Christ are awaiting to be brought before God by the Resurrected Christ, who after his death and before rising to Heaven descended into Limbo. Various literary sources—the Apostles’ Creed and the First Letter of Peter (3:18–20)—describe Christ’s descent into Hell after his burial and before the Resurrection. In texts recognized by the Roman Catholic Church, however, there are only brief hints open to interpretation and no accurate account of Christ’s descent into Limbo.<sup>6</sup>

The Gospel of Nicodemus Apocryphal<sup>7</sup> alludes to the area between Earth and Hell where Christ encounters several of the Old Testament figures, such as Adam, Noah, Set, Isaiah, Simeon, Habakkuk, Micah, Enoch, Elijah, Jacob, Judith, Eve (Craveri, 1990, pp. 351-376), and David (*ivi*, p. 375), some of which are depicted in Bronzino’s painting. Curiously, Bronzino portrayed himself in the figure of David (**Figure 1**) (Vasari, 1968, pp. 234-235), the traditional biblical figure selected by the Florentines for his faith and bravery (Wallace, 2011; Cagiotti *et al.*, 2022).

## B. Sermons of Fra Serafino Razzi

The friendship between Bronzino and the brothers Razzi, Serafino and Silvano, Benedetto Varchi (Varchi, 1859, p.8), and Vasari is well noted in the *Vite* of 1568 (Vasari, 1968, p. 237).<sup>8</sup> Fra Serafino was born in Marradi in 1531 and

<sup>4</sup> Athanasian Creed, see <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02033b.htm> (accessed 15 August 2023).

<sup>5</sup> See [https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-5lijplxCkA4qdCgY/The+Gospel+Of+Nicodemus\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-5lijplxCkA4qdCgY/The+Gospel+Of+Nicodemus_djvu.txt) (accessed 15 August 2023).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.usccb.org/prayers/apostles-creed> (accessed 15 August 2023).

<sup>7</sup> In the Gospel of Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea’s account consists of three parts: the Acts of Pilate, Christ’s Death and Burial, and Christ’s descent into Hell. See [https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-5lijplxCkA4qdCgY/The+Gospel+Of+Nicodemus\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/pdfy-5lijplxCkA4qdCgY/The+Gospel+Of+Nicodemus_djvu.txt) (accessed 15 August 2023), chaps. 3–6.

<sup>8</sup> See also Masselli, 1832–38, Part 1; Carrara, 2010–2012, pp. 155–184; Masselli, 1832-38, Part IV, claims that the philosophical influences of Christian theology and values are based the concepts of Borghini and Razzi; Vasari, 1968.

entered the Dominican convent of San Marco in Florence in 1549.<sup>9</sup> He was a man of faith and study, animated by a great love for knowledge. This led him to write numerous texts on various topics, including theology, hagiography, history, and philosophy, and to report the sermons he preached and then collected in volumes. There was a close bond between the brothers Razzi, Serafino, and Silvano, as evidenced by Silvano's dedicatory preface for his brother's work, e.g., *Rosario in ottava rima* and the *Sermoni* (Negri, 1722, pp. 408, 500-502).

Silvano Razzi was a well-known scholar who wrote comedies and historical and religious works, including the *Life of the Virgin* (Razzi, 1614, p. 125). He entered the Camaldolese order only after having experienced secular life and having studied in Pisa. He was part of the cultural circle of the Medici court. He was also a friend and executor of Benedetto Varchi, dedicating a series of epigrams in his honour (Negri, 1722, pp. 408, 500-502).

Fra Razzi's *Sermoni predicabili per tutta la quaresima* covers various topics related to Easter Sunday, such as Christ's Death, his Resurrection and his descent into Limbo (Razzi, 1590; Gaston, 1983, p. 70, n. 67). Fra Razzi poetically described several figures from the Old Testament, including heroines. It is known that Bronzino's *Christ's Descent into Limbo* was influenced by Razzi's vivid descriptions (Razzi, 1590, pp. 273, 274-276).

In the preface to this first sermon, Fra Razzi mentions the Old Testament figures of Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David; curiously, Moses, Abel, Jacob, and his sons are missing. He honours the female heroines Eve, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachele, and Leah (Razzi, 1590, pp. 274-276; Alighieri, 1994, *Inferno*, canto IV, pp. 58-60). Razzi's passage derives from Dante's Canto IV of *Inferno* (Razzi, 1590, pp. 274-276; Alighieri, 1994, *Inferno*, canto IV, pp. 58-60). From the Old Testament, he comments on the New Testament, focusing on Saint Joseph and Saint John the Evangelist, who died before the redemptive death of Christ and thus were waiting in Limbo to be rescued by Christ. Bronzino depicted them in the lower left-hand corner of his painting. In the Second Part of his sermon, Razzi focused on Christ's death and the women who visited his tomb, including an original account of the Virgin Mary's response to her son's death (Razzi, 1590, p. 278).

Although a spiritually moving sermon, Razzi's content is not recorded in the church's canons. His unique interpretation and hypothesis about the figures in Limbo assisted in decoding Bronzino's images, particularly the figure of the woman in the lower left-hand corner of the painting, which I identify as the Virgin Mary. Razzi' wrote of the Virgin Mary: "In the secrecy of her chamber she was made worthy of seeing Christ before anyone else" (*ibid.*). The Virgin Mary saw her son, the risen Christ, before he appeared to the other women. The painting by Bronzino highlights the close bond between mother and son using similar celestial colours,

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<sup>9</sup>See also Betti De Simonis, 2011, Pal.37, 89 r, for life and works of Fra Serafino Razzi; Powers, 2013, pp. 45–52; Powers, 2023.

the veil that drapes around the nude body of Christ, the garments worn by the Virgin Mary, and, most significantly, her adoring and rejoicing posture as Christ enters Limbo (**Figure 5**).



Figura 5. Agnolo Bronzino, *Virgin Mary, Joseph, and John the Evangelist, det., Christ's Descent into Limbo*, 1552, oil on wood. Chapel of Giovanni Zanchini (Novitiate Medici Chapel). Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence. Photo credit: author.

Razzi spoke about a profound vision during his sermon on Our Lady's vision of her son in Limbo. He noted that the Virgin Mary was praying in her house while this was happening. This means that she was connected, both spatially and temporally, with the events that were taking place in Limbo involving her son. Thus, the mother actively participated in her son's actions in Limbo. In this symbolic depiction, Razzi compared the Virgin Mary, who meditated on Psalm 56<sup>10</sup> while praying for her son's return, to the Archangel Gabriel, who appeared to her at Incarnation. In this symbolic account, Christ embraced his mother, crowned her empress of the world, and encouraged the "beata turba"<sup>11</sup> to honour her while he descended into Limbo to free and save souls.

In the sixteenth century, Silvano Razzi's writings about the life of the Virgin Mary and Fra Serafino Razzi's sermons about the Descent into Limbo conveyed the idea that Christ and the Virgin Mary met in Limbo before the Resurrection. This blessed meeting occurred before the Holy Women went to Christ's tomb.

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<sup>10</sup> For the content of Psalm 56, see <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%2056&version=NIV> (accessed 15 August 2023).

<sup>11</sup> In *Exsultet, The Exultant Praise of Easter Proclamation*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exsultet> (accessed 15 August 2023).



**C. Poetical Sources: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio**

The subject in the painting may also have been influenced by the literary works of Dante Alighieri, Francesco Petrarca, and Giovanni Boccaccio, which Bronzino widely admired. Gaston noted that Bronzino's poetry showed a strong influence from Dante, Petrarca, and Boccaccio, as well as an extensive knowledge of classical mythology (Gaston, 1983, pp. 63-64). Bronzino's passion for Dante was well known even before he became a Florentine Academy member. Benedetto Varchi once wrote in a letter that the painter had committed all of Dante's works and a significant portion of Boccaccio's writings to memory (*ivi*, pp. 58, 63-64).

Dante Alighieri sets part of the *Divine Comedy* in Limbo, imagining it as the first circle of Hell, a special place where souls are not subjected to suffering. Limbo means a place of waiting, the margin of the infernal abyss. In Limbo, accompanied by the poet Virgil, Dante meets illustrious characters from Antiquity, mythology, and the Old Testament. They lived as righteous people but did not receive baptism. Therefore, they did not have access to Paradise (Alighieri, 1994, *Inferno*, Canto IV, pp. 31-42). After arriving in Limbo, Virgil witnessed Christ descending to free the souls of the Patriarchs shortly after his death (*ivi*, pp. 49-63). The Patriarchs, who had lived during the first part of God's plan of salvation as told in the Old Testament, were the souls Christ freed.

Canto IV of the *Inferno* may have influenced the artist's mind when choosing the characters to represent. Dante's rhymes may have helped the painter's visualization. Scholars have identified five Patriarchs chosen by Dante, who are also reappropriated in Bronzino's *Descent into Limbo*, such as Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, and David. Some figures, Abel, Jacob, his sons, and his wife Rachel are not included.

In Canto IV of the *Inferno*, the poet honours an ancient female heroine, Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, "a valiant woman ... marvelous in power and mastery (Boccaccio, 1841, Chapter XXX), who fell in love with Hector and helped him fight against the Greeks, losing her life for this" (Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto IV, p. 124). Penthesilea is compared with Camilla, the Queen of the Volsci, highly admired in Virgil's *Aeneid* (11:532–35), whom Dante placed in "Limbo degli Spiriti Magni" next to Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons (*ibid.*). Petrarch's *Triumphs* and Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus Claris* praise Camilla as a "marvelous and supremely praiseworthy woman" ... "a virgin warrior who died fighting against the ranks of Aeneas" (Boccaccio, 1841, Chapter XXXVII).

Curiously, these strong, combative, and beautiful women were often depicted with one breast uncovered, like an Amazon leader. In the *Descent into Limbo*, Bronzino conflated the images of these two protagonists into one, showing in the foreground a semi-nude woman revealing her breasts, kneeling on a rock while pulling a soul out of Limbo. In her nude depiction, Bronzino recalls the sculpture of *Amazzone Mattei* from the Pio Clementino Museum in the Vatican

Museums. This sculpture was a copy of a lost original by Phidias of the *Wounded Amazon*, now in the Giovanni Barracco Museum of Ancient Sculpture in Rome.<sup>12</sup> The statue was found at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome (Marvin, 1983, pp. 374–384; Gensheimer, 2018, “Appendix 2).

As an artist, Bronzino was also an admirer of Petrarch’s work, particularly of his female heroines. In depicting the female painters, he probably recalled Petrarch’s *The Triumphs*, an allegorical poem written in the Italian vernacular between 1351 and 1374. Petrarch’s six chapters celebrate Love, Modesty, Death, Fame, Time, and Eternity as a constructive path toward redemption from sin. His inspiration from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is evident in his work, enlightening and inspiring readers towards a better life. The *Triumph of Modesty* (*Trionfo della Pudicizia*) alludes to the beautiful Laura, the woman loved and idealized by Petrarca. She resists Cupid’s inappropriate romantic advances to preserve her decency and purity.” In the poem, there are other personifications of honourable women who are examples of virtue—for example, Judith, the wise, chaste, and strong Jewish woman (Petrarca, 1958, p. 142) who fought for modesty alongside her friend Camilla, Queen of the Volsci (*ivi*, pp. 70-90).

Bronzino was also influenced by Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De Mulieribus Claris*, a series of 106 biographies of illustrious women written in Latin between 1361 and 1362. These female heroines throughout history have served as examples of virtuous behaviour. In his painting, Bronzino depicted four specific heroines mentioned by Boccaccio: Eve, Camilla, Constance, and Judith.

For Boccaccio, the first illustrious woman is the progenitor Eve, who is the “Mother of all humans” (Boccaccio, 1841, Chapter I)<sup>13</sup> Being created by the hand of the Creator is the source of Eve’s beauty and positivity, which extends beyond her physical appearance to encompass her moral character. Boccaccio explained how Eve, a victim of the devil’s envy, was deceived due to her weakness. Despite her banishment from Paradise, Eve’s virtuous life qualifies her as a noblewoman. Bronzino’s painting powerfully portrays Eve as a partially nude figure, wrapped around in a veil and with downcast eyes. This reveals her modesty and virtue according to Boccaccio’s description (**Figure 1**).<sup>14</sup>

Another Boccaccio heroine is Camilla, Queen of the Volsci, mentioned earlier with heroine Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, honoured in Dante’s Canto IV of the *Inferno* (Boccaccio, 1841, Chapter XXXVII). After describing the heroic

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<sup>12</sup> For the image, see <https://www.alamy.com/rome-italy-statue-of-wounded-amazon-from-a-greek-original-by-phidias-head-is-a-replica-of-amazon-by-polykleitos-capitoline-museums-musei-capitoline-image224962987.html> (accessed 15 August 2023). There are other copies at the Capitoline Museums in Rome, The Metropolitan Museum in New York City, and The Walter Art Collection in Baltimore, MD.

<sup>13</sup> Eve is honoured for her physical and metaphysical beauty: “belleza del corpo” and “magnifiche virtù” (beautiful body and admirable virtue).

<sup>14</sup> The contrapposto stance and design of Bronzino’s Eve recalls Botticelli’s Venus in the *Birth of Venus* of 1485–1490 at the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence.

deeds of Camilla, Boccaccio further writes: “I urge the women of our generation to take a careful look at her” (*ibid.*). He continued eulogizing her customs and urged that young girls should adopt her virtues. Curiously, in representing the conflated personifications of Camilla and Penthesilea, Bronzino selected the portrait of a beautiful sixteenth-century woman, Camilla Tebaldi del Corno (Zeigler, 2013, pp. 81-107, esp. 106).

In *De Mulieribus Claris*, Boccaccio praised another royal figure, Constance, Queen of Sicily, the mother of Frederick II of Swabia (Boccaccio, 1841, Chapter CI),<sup>15</sup> recounting Dante's Canto III of *Paradiso*, where her story unfolds. She was forced to leave the convent to marry Henry VI. However, she continued to live following the cloistered rule (Alighieri, 1994, *Paradiso*, Canto III, pp. 109-120).

In the painting, Bronzino again conflated the personification of Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, and Constance, the Queen of Sicily, with the Old Testament figure of Judith. The painting depicts a kneeling figure in delicate blue clothes wrapped in an emerald-green mantle. The figure wears a jewelled strap that highlights her one exposed breast. She holds a sword on which Bronzino's signature and the date of the painting are inscribed (**Figure 3**).



Figura 3. Agnolo Bronzino, *Judith, det., Christ's Descent into Limbo, 1552, oil on wood.*

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<sup>15</sup> Boccaccio, *op. cit.*, chapter CI. “Roman emperor Constance was famous on earth for the highest height in the world.” Hence it could have been flattering to bear her name and be assimilated to such a historical figure.

In the painting, Judith extends her right hand toward the viewer, indicating Christ's arrival in Limbo. Among all the Old Testament figures in the painting, only David (portrayed in Bronzino's self-portrait) and Judith face directly toward the viewer. Both these biblical figures were considered holy patrons by the Florentine community because their heroic and moral deeds were to be emulated.

Judith continues the legacy of historical pagan heroines such as Athena, Artemis, and Penthesilea (De Girolami Cheney, 2000, pp. 154-192; Apostolos-Cappadona, 2010, p. 327). The Church Fathers interpreted Judith as the prototype of the Virgin Mary, uniting Jewish-Christian and classical traditions of the fighting virgin (*ivi*, pp. 325-327). According to the Scriptures, Judith removed her widow's clothes and "She put sandals on her feet, girded necklaces and put on bracelets, rings and earrings and every other ornament she had and made herself very charming in the eyes of any man who saw her" (Old Testament Judith 10:4).<sup>16</sup> Bronzino visualized this text, depicting the woman wearing a shoulder strap engraved in gold and coloured stones as Judith (**Figure 3**).

After having killed Holofernes, Judith is greeted by Ozias with the words: "Blessed are you, daughter, before the Highest God, more than all the women who live on earth" (*ivi*, 13:18).<sup>17</sup> This action can be compared with Elizabeth addressing the Virgin Mary: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42).<sup>18</sup> The Virgin Mary and Judith both chose to let themselves be guided by God's will, ending up proving to be full of courage and strength, even though, *a priori*, they did not seem suitable to change the fate of their people and history (Ciletti, 2010, pp. 345-368).

In the painting, the female figure in front of Judith, who is helping another figure out of Limbo, remains unidentified.<sup>19</sup> Her gesture parallels Christ's gesture rescuing the older man, Noah (Falciani, 2010, pp. 284-285). In the Sacred Scripture, the Book of Judith is immediately followed by the Book of Esther, another heroic "Jewish woman of good looks and comely appearance" (Old Testament, Esther 2:7).<sup>20</sup> Not by chance, Bronzino placed Judith in front of a woman who can be considered as Esther.

Esther lived in exile in Babylon along with her Jewish people. King Ahasuerus, who held a beauty contest to find a new queen, "loved Esther more than all other women, and she found grace and favour in his eyes more than all the other virgins. He put the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (*ivi*, 2:17).<sup>21</sup> According to the Book of Esther, Haman, a dignitary of the king, had escalated the situation, which had put the Jews in danger of being massacred on the

<sup>16</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCI.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCI.HTM).

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCI.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCI.HTM).

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCI.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCI.HTM).

<sup>19</sup> In Bronzino's fresco of Moses causing water to flow from the rock in the Chapel of Eleonora da Toledo, the same face is seen in the woman on the far left of the fresco.

<sup>20</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCQ.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCQ.HTM).

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCQ.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCQ.HTM).

king's orders. However, Esther intervened by pleading with the king to prevent the extermination of her Jewish people. Her prayers and pleas were successful, resulting in the rescue of her people.<sup>22</sup>

When analysing the words in the Book of Esther (2:7) and comparing them to similar words in the New Testament (Luke 1:30), an interesting correlation arises, e.g., “and she found grace and favour in his eyes more than all the other virgins” recalling the words of the archangel “Do not be afraid, Mary, because you have found favour with God.”<sup>23</sup> Esther, like Judith and Mary, starts from a place of inadequacy but invokes God in prayer to accomplish great things (Judith 13:4–7; Esther 4:17; Luke 1:38 for Mary). Several liturgical sources compare Esther with the Virgin Mary; for example, Rabanus Maurus defines Esther as “figura Ecclesiae” (Mauro, 1864, vol. 109, Chapter, III, pp. 645–646.); Saint Anthony of Padua mentioned that “Esther is the Blessed Virgin Mary” (Saint Anthony of Padua, Part 8, Chapter 3);<sup>24</sup> and Blessed Albert the Great applied “the story of Queen Esther as a figure of our Queen Mary” (De Fiores and Gambero, 2005, p. 296). During the Middle Ages, Limardo Daturi commented on the similarities between the figures of Esther and the Virgin Mary (Limardo-Daturi, 2004, pp. 1, 53, 169).

In the painting, Bronzino visually united the figures of Eve, Judith, and Esther in depicting their physical beauty. Their bare breasts refer to physical beauty, spiritual love, and blessings (Luke 11:27, “God bless your mother—the womb from which you came, and the breasts that nurse you”). Hence their loving and heroic roles are to be considered forerunners and cooperators of Christ's salvation.

In the lower left-hand corner of the painting, the woman dressed and veiled in celestial blue colours, her hands crossed on her chest, with lips parted, and gazing with admiration and love to Christ is probably the Virgin Mary (Razzi, 1614, p. 125). Alessandro Allori's *Limbo* of 1593 for the Salviati Chapel in the church of San Mark in Florence depicts a similar image of the Virgin Mary veiled, dressed in blue, in a praying attitude.<sup>25</sup>

Next to her, only the head of an older man can be seen. He has gray hair, and he too gazes with loving admiration at Christ. This is probably Joseph, the Virgin Mary's companion and legal father to Christ (**Figure 4**). Next to them, a young Apollonian figure, seen from the back, turns to Joseph to point out the arrival of Christ in Limbo. He is John the Apostle, whom Christ entrusted with caring for his mother, the Virgin Mary, at the Crucifixion (Revelation 19:26–27).

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<sup>22</sup> Mordecai says to Esther: “Who knows that you have not been elevated to queen precisely in anticipation of a circumstance like this”; *ivi*, 4:14, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCQ.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCQ.HTM).

<sup>23</sup> Luke 1:30, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/\\_PCQ.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ITA0001/_PCQ.HTM).

<sup>24</sup> Saint Anthony of Padua, <https://www.monasterovirtuale.it/s-antonio-di-padova/s-antonio-di-padova-i-sermoni-parte-ottava.html>.

<sup>25</sup> For the image, see [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San\\_marco\\_firenze\\_cappella\\_salviati\\_alessandro\\_allori\\_discensa\\_nel\\_limbo\\_1593\\_circa.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:San_marco_firenze_cappella_salviati_alessandro_allori_discensa_nel_limbo_1593_circa.JPG) (accessed 15 August 2023).

Critics have been very interested in the historical characters portrayed in Bronzino's paintings. Vasari wrote that "the portraits look very natural," (Vasari, 1968, pp. 234-235) referring to those of Pontormo, Giovanbattista Gelli, Bachiacca, and two Florentine women of beauty and virtue, such as Camilla Tedaldi del Corno (Strozzi il Vecchio, 2003)<sup>26</sup> and Costanza da Sommaia Doni, who posed for image the painting (Gaston, 1983, pp. 41-73; Matteoli, 1969, pp. 281-316; Plaisance, 2008, p. 111; Costamagna, 2010, p. 104). Among scholars, it has been proposed that Bronzino's facial image of Camilla is based on the portrait of Camilla Tebaldi del Corno (Alighieri, 1994, Canto IV, p. 124), and the one of Judith, symbol of Fortitude, reflects the portrait of Costanza Da Sommaia (Gaston, 1983, p. 58).<sup>27</sup> She modelled not only for Bronzino but also for the Florentine painter Plautilla Nelli (Murphy, 2001, pp. 507-509), a Dominican nun mentioned by Vasari in *Vite* (Vasari, 1968).

## Conclusion

Critics have been very interested in the historical characters portrayed in Bronzino's paintings. Vasari wrote that "the portraits look very natural," (*ivi*, pp. 234-235) referring to those of Pontormo, Giovanbattista Gelli, Bachiacca, and two Florentine women of beauty and virtue (Costanza da Sommaia Doni and Camilla Tedaldi del Corno) (Gaston, 1983, pp. 41-73; Matteoli, 1969, pp. 281-316). Scholarship by Matteoli, Gaston, Falciani, and Zeigler has identified these figures in the painting; I have abided by their identifications but with some modifications of the title about Fra Razzi's sermon. Zeigler sheds light on the ties of friendship and interest between Giovanni Zanchini, who commissioned the work from Bronzino, and Giovanni da Sommaia, whose niece Maddalena married Zanchini's son in 1559 (Vasari, 1968, pp. 234-235; Zeigler, 2013, p. 85).

Suppose two lines were drawn—one straight line from Eve's eyes and those of the Virgin Mary. The second line, a curved line, would start from the eyes of the Virgin Mary, moving diagonally to the eyes of Penthesilea-Camilla, up to the eyes of Judith-Costanza, and then moving straight up to the eyes of Eve (**Figure 6**).

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<sup>26</sup> See: <http://www.bibliotecaitaliana.it/testo/bibit001603>. The text reads: "Per la Camilla de' Tedaldi. "Amor, Diletto e Pace / dolce insieme scherzando, al Signor nostro / di man cadde e quaggiù dal terzo chiostro / s'apprese alma sua face. / Chi non sen vola e sface / al foco dell'angeliche faville, / ha ben di ghiaccio il cor, l'ha ben di sasso: / arde il chiaro Arno lasso, / arde la vaga Fille, / ardon cittadi e ville, / ardono a mille a mille, e tutto avvampa / il ciel della sua lampa." For G. B. Strozzi il Vecchio, see Baldacci, 1975), p. 314.

<sup>27</sup> See also: Murphy, 2001, pp. 507–509, discussed at great length the cultural involvement of this woman Camilla da Sommaia with the Doni and Strozzi families.

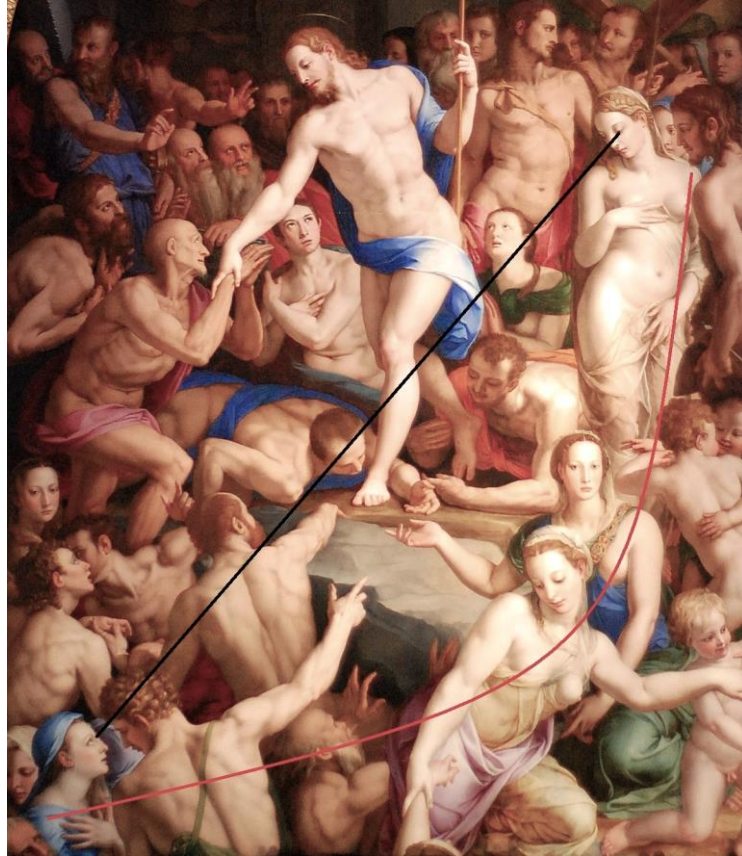


Figura 6. Agnolo Bronzino, *Christ's Descent into Limbo*, 1552, oil on wood. Chapel of Giovanni Zanchini (Novitiate Medici Chapel), Basilica of Santa Croce, Florence. Photo credit: author

In this second line, it is possible to identify the main female characters of the scene, a *trait d'union* between the two women—Eve and Virgin Mary—who are fundamental in the history of salvation. This imaginary line is like a riverbed that contains and supports the figure of Christ, as if, reconnecting myself to what was hypothesized above, Bronzino was trying to demonstrate how the female gender is the scaffolding on which not only human existence rests but also the eternal life that the Redeemer promises (**Figure 6**).

Probably, Bronzino was inspired by the story about Easter contained in the *Sermoni Predicabili* and visualized it in *Christ's Descent into Limbo*. The first Eve and the New Eve, the Virgin Mary, are the initial extremes of God's plan of salvation, one in the Old Testament, the other in the New. Eve gave birth to Cain and Abel, the firstborn in the Old Testament, and Mary to Christ, her firstborn in the New Testament. Suppose Eve is the one who yields to sin. In that case, Mary is the one without sin, the all-holy: two different natures but not dissimilar roles in giving birth and raising children, which is then the natural task of the woman, as Arthur B. Calkins (Calkins, 2005, pp. 113-169) clarifies when he reports the phrase "it may already have become natural in the second half of the second century to look at Eve, the 'mother of all living,' and Mary, the mother of Christ, together,

understanding and interpreting each of the two most important women in human history based on the other” (*ibid.*, esp. 116, n. 6).

Thus, Bronzino’s *Christ’s Descent into Limbo* could be interpreted as a symbolic ode to the co-creator—the individual selected by God to bestow life, tend to humanity, and work alongside God in shaping the universe. This celestial artisan offers spiritual sustenance through the Word and the Eucharist, with the Virgin Mary acting as a confidant and a mediator for the soul’s redemption.

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