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'The poor carpenter': Reinterpreting Christian Mythology in the *Assassin's Creed*Game Series

Frank G. Bosman

Abstract

In the *Assassin's Creed* game series, developer Ubisoft reinterprets traditional Christian mythology in a rationalistic-reductionist manner. Core narratives of the Old and New Testament, especially the miracle stories, are reimagined as produced by hyper-advanced scientific objects once possessed by an ancient but eradicated civilization. Gnostic, Docetic and Islamic theological traces can be identified in this process of reinventing traditional Christian mythology. Starting point of this article is the so-called 'Shroud of Eden' in the video game *Assassin's Creed. Syndicate* (2015), which is based on the real-life Shroud of Turin (Italy), believed by many Christians to be the burial shroud of Jesus of Nazareth himself.

Keywords: Assassin's Creed, Christology, Gnosticism, Docetism, Sethism, Marcionism, Shroud of Turin, Swoon Hypothesis, Nizari Isma'ilis, Templers, Assassins

Introduction

In the video game *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate (AC:S*, 2015), the player controls two Assassins, Jacob and Evie Frye. The Fryes are on a quest to find an ancient and mysterious object called 'the Shroud of Eden', which is believed to be somewhere in London around 1868. In mission #4 (called 'Playing It By Ear'), Evie Frye has a conversation with a fellow Assassin, Henry Green, about a number of documents, stolen earlier in the game from Lucy Thorne, a member of the rivaling Templar Order.

"Henry: [The document] says the London Assassins had found a Shroud. Evie: The Shroud of Eden is supposed to heal even the greatest, even the gravest injury. (...) How much do you know about the Shroud of Eden?

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Henry: It's said to heal the sick. Popular myth is that it brings people back from the dead, but the Assassin records say that's not true."

The in-game biography provides the following description of Thorne's life and work:

"[Lucy Thorne] branched out into the study of obscure religious knowledge, into magic and occult philosophy. (...) In her spare time, she grew more and more taken with occult philosophy and supposedly magical objects, such as the Shroud of Turin."

It is not difficult to conclude on the basis of this information that the two shrouds mentioned are identical, especially if we bear in mind Henry's description, about its capacities for healing and (supposedly) for raising people from the dead. The Shroud of Turin is a real-life religious object that is kept in the Cathedral of Saint John the Baptist in Turin, Italy. It shows the remarkable image of a crucified man. And although its origins are heavily debated among scholars and the faithful, for many Christians this piece of linen is the actual shroud of Jesus of Nazareth himself, in which he was buried after his crucifixion (Mark 15:46). By identifying the Shroud of Eden with its real-life counterpart in Turin, *Assassin's Creed* developer Ubisoft reinterprets one of the fundamental episodes of Christian mythology, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Ubisoft links Jesus' shroud with a whole set of fictional objects, known in the *Assassin's Creed* universe as 'Pieces of Eden', ancient and powerful artifacts belonging to a now extinct race, called 'the First Civilization'.

In the *Assassin's Creed* series, a whole range of religious objects from the traditional Christian tradition are considered to be Pieces of Eden, which reinterprets this tradition in a wholly new way. The forbidden fruit of Eden, the cloak of David who killed Goliath, the mantle of Joseph of Egypt and the shroud of Jesus are all Pieces of Eden. Not only are these religious objects reinterpreted, but the entire traditional

Christian mythology (and consequentially also the theology) as such is turned on its head, with world history being framed as an ongoing battle between Templars and Assassins over the possession of these Pieces of Eden. The eating of the forbidden fruit of Eden by Adam and Eve (Genesis 3), is no longer seen as a sin against God's commandment (as it is in Judaism and Christianity), but as a liberating act of oppressed humankind against the diabolical 'gods' of the First Civilization. And Jesus' death on the cross and his miracles are no more than illusions produced by one of the pieces.

As will be argued in this article, the *Assassin's Creed* game series re-interprets key elements of the traditional Christian mythology in very specific way, with dramatic consequences for the accompanying Christian theology. These consequences concern: anthropogenesis (the origin of humankind), teleology (the ultimate goal of humankind in the cosmos thought of as created by God), the history of salvation (human history seen as 'guided' by God) and Christology (theology concerning the figure of Jesus Christ in the Christian faith).

The primary main sources used in this article are: (1) Six specific games from the *Assassin's Creed* series, known together as the 'Desmond Saga' (see below), which are chronologically and narratologically closely connected: *Assassin's Creed* (AC, 2007), *Assassin's Creed II* (AC2, 2009), *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (AC:B, 2010), *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (AC:R, 2011), *Assassin's Creed III* (AC3, 2012) and *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (AC:S, 2015). (2) Two other digital projects by Ubisoft: a Facebook game called *Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy* (AC:PL, 2010) and the online community project *Assassin's Creed: Initiates* (AC:I, 2012). And (3) Ubisoft's own *Assassin's Creed Encyclopedia* (2013). The main *Assassin's Creed* games are single-payer, third-person, stealth and parkour games set in different historical settings, played on multiple

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platforms.

In the first section, I will briefly discuss the meta-narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* series. In the second section, I will focus on the role that the Pieces of Eden play in the Old Testament stories (especially the stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the Nephilim, David and Goliath, and Joseph of Egypt), thus confronting the traditional interpretation of these stories with that of the *Assassin's Creed* series.ⁱⁱⁱ In the third section, I will do the same with the New Testament (especially with the stories of Jesus' reported miracles, and his death and resurrection). In the fourth section, I will present my conclusions concerning the re-interpretation of traditional Christian mythology and its theological consequences.

A brief comment on methodology. In this article, I will regard video games as 'playable texts' (Lauteren 2002). Games can be regarded as such because the idea of 'playable texts' summarizes the two 'structural qualities' of computer games. Videogames are 'texts' because they are mediated sign systems, and are given meaning by their audience. This audience is not limited to the actual gamers and those who watch the gamers play their games, but it also includes the larger culture itself, of which the players and the watchers are part. Videogames are not just 'texts', but *playable* texts. Video games incorporate elements of contest; they can be won or lost. The 'pleasure' of gaming is derived from the uncertainty of the outcome of the game.

Treating the video games as playable texts and using a gamer-immanent approach (Heidbrink, Knoll and Wysocki 2015) in this article, I will use close reading of the primary sources of my research, the actual video games themselves, as well as secondary sources, i.e. material provided by critics and scholars discussing the same

game. Close reading of the video game series is performed by playing the games themselves (multiple times), including all possible (side) missions/quests. For this article I used the PC version of the games. The various source materials – games, books and internet pages – are not only linked together (overtly or implicitly), but are in narrative synchronization with each other. A transmedial approach to the *Assassin's Creed* series is therefore required (Dowd 2013).

As for a theological methodology, I will utilize a cultural theological approach to the *Assassin's Creed* universe and narrative (Kelton 2005). The object of cultural theology is modern-day culture (like novels, movies and video games) in relation to the explicit and (often) implicit traces within this culture, of traditional religious symbols, objects, texts and notions. These traces are to be identified as such, explicated, analyzed and critically discussed in relation to the (originating) religious and theological tradition(s). Consequentially, the exegetical method used in this article, is that of the 'reception history' or *Wirkungsgeschichte* (Breed 2014). I am not interested in the 'true meaning' of the Biblical material (whenever this is possible or not), but how – in different contexts – these stories have been (re-)interpreted within and outside (traditional) Christian tradition.

The importance of the inquiry conducted in this article within the framework of the study of religion in video games, can be localized in the significance of the video games as cultural artifacts articulating all kinds of existential notions and opinions, among which religious and religiously inspired themes have their own place.

The First Civilization. Assassin's Creed's Meta-Narrative

The meta-narrative of the Assassin's Creed series is a multi-leveled allohistorical

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complex. At the first level, the narrative of *Assassin's Creed* is a variation on the pseudoscientific 'Ancient Astronauts Hypothesis' (Feder 2002), popularized by Erich von Däniken's bestseller *Chariots of the Gods?* (1969). Some 100,000 years ago, an unknown race ruled over the earth. The Isu (also known as the First Civilization, Those Who Came Before or the Precursors) were native to the earth, and were technologically highly advanced (*AC Encyclopedia* 52-54). They were responsible for the creation of the human race, which they viewed as a domestic (and cheap) work force. Unable to understand the greatness of the Isu, the early humans considered them gods. Eventually, humankind rebelled against its creators, seizing their most important artifacts, known as 'Pieces of Eden' (*AC Encyclopedia*, 54-55). This rebellion coincided with a comic disaster, known as the 'Toba Catastrophe', which caused the Isu to become extinct, surviving only in the myths and legends of the world's ancient religions and civilizations (*AC Encyclopedia*, 53).

At the second level, the meta-narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* series provides a new framework for the history of humankind, as an ongoing battle between various human factions and groups for the possession of the remnants of the Isu, the Pieces of Eden. The two most important factions are the Assassin Brotherhood (loosely based on the historical Nizai Isma'ilis, see below) and the Order of the Knights Templar (loosely based on the historical organization of the same name). The Templars represent the oppressive side of humankind, and they strive for order and discipline, while the Assassins are portrayed as fighters for human freedom and, consequently, as heralds of chaos and anarchy (*AC Encyclopedia*, 14 and 31). However, this simplistic moral bias is somewhat reduced in the later installments of the game series (Schäfer 2015).

The narratives of individual games concern the adventures of a contemporary

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Assassin. In the first six games of the main series (*AC1*, *AC2*, *AC:B*, *AC:R*, *AC3* and in a certain sense *AC:S* too) the protagonist is Desmond Miles, a ordinary bartender unaware of his long line of Assassin ancestors. Both the Templars and the Assassin factions try to get hold of Desmond (either by kidnapping him or persuading him to collaborate). With the help of a machine called the 'Animus' (Latin for 'life'), Desmond is able to relive the 'genetic memories' of his (Assassin) ancestors: the Syrian Altaïr ibn-La'Ahad (1165-1257; *AC1* and *AC:R*), the Italian Ezio Auditore da Firenze (1459-1524; *AC2*, *AC:B*) and the Native American Connor (1756-?; *AC3*). The player either controls Desmond in the present, or one of his Assassin ancestors. Both Templars and Assassins need the help of Desmond's relived memories to locate various Pieces of Eden, often dubbed 'Apples of Eden'. Because of the death of Desmond Miles at the end of *AC3*, the role of the contemporary assassin in *AC:S* is taken by an anonymous 'initiate', who is asked to 'tap' in in the genetic memory of the two London assassins Jacob and Evie Frye by the contemporary Assassin Brotherhood.

The Apples of Eden and the Pentateuch

In the meta-narrative of the *Assassin's Creed* series (as described above), Adam and Eve are conceptualized as two hybrid human-Isu creatures. When playing *AC2*, the player can come across hidden messages of Clay Kaczmarek (called 'Subject 16' in *AC2*), Desmond's predecessor in the Templars' plans to obtain all Isu artifacts (*AC Encyclopedia*, 93). One of these messages, dubbed 'session 12', shows Adam and Eve rebelling against their creators. As hybrid beings, they are immune to the effects of the mind-controlling powers of the Pieces of Eden. Adam and Eve appear to have stolen one or more of the Isu's artifacts, known as 'Pieces of Eden' or 'Apples of Eden'.

This message is a clear reference to the story of Genesis 3, known as 'the Temptation

and Fall' of humankind. In this story, Adam and Eve sin against God's commandment not to eat the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Tempted by a serpent, traditionally identified as the devil, Adam and Eve nevertheless pluck and eat the fruit, leading to their banishment from paradise by an angry God. Traditionally, the fruit Adam and Eve ate was identified as an apple, probably because the Latin word for 'sin' is the same as for 'apple', *malum* (LaCocque 2006).

The Apple of Eden also plays a role in the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, that is, in the *Assassin's Creed* version of the story. In the traditional Biblical story (Genesis 4), Abel and Cain are brothers, the sons of Adam and Eve. Both sacrifice to God, but God only favors Abel's sacrifice. Cain, enraged, kills his brother Abel. God then curses Cain: 'Now you're more cursed than the ground, which has opened to receive your brother's blood from your hand.' (Genesis 4:11) ^{iv} Cain, fearful that he will be killed in revenge, receives a special 'mark' from God. 'Then the Lord placed a sign on Cain so that no one finding him would kill him.' (Genesis 4:15b)

AC2 offers a different version of the story, communicated to the player through so-called 'Glyphs'. Glyphs are sets of background information scattered through the virtual world of AC2's Renaissance Italy. The Glyphs too were created by Clay Kaczmarek. They only reveal their secrets when they are manipulated by the player like a tabletop puzzle. The sixth glyph just mentioned is found in the north-west of Monteriggioni, at the south wall of a villa. When activated, the glyph shows four (parts of) famous paintings depicting Cain killing Abel: Rubens' Cain Slaying Abel (1608/9), Tintoretto's The Murder of Abel (1551/2), Manfredi's Cain and Abel (circa 1600) and Dürer's Cain kills Abel (1511).

Interestingly, when the four Cain and Abel paintings are scanned in-game, two other

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clues appear. In all paintings, Cain is depicted as bearing a (hidden) Templar cross on his forehead and holding a Piece of Eden, an Apple of Eden, in his hand. The suggestion is that the fight between Abel and Cain was not about the fact that God preferred the former's sacrifice to the latter's, but about the possession of an Isu artifact, probably stolen by their parents, Adam and Eve (*AC Encyclopedia*, 32). Because Cain is branded with the Templar cross, the suggestion is furthermore that the fight between the two brothers was the origin of the future Assassin and Templar factions, which were to fight each other forever for the Pieces of Eden. Cain represents the Templars, Abel the Assassins. From the moment humankind laid its hands on the power of the Isu, in the form of the Pieces of Eden, it has been fighting among itself over who has control and who has not, a struggle that continues up to today.

There is yet another reference to the book of Genesis in relation to the Isu. In *AC3* (sequence 12), Desmond Miles complains about the cryptic nature of the Isu messages. Desmond's father William Miles replies:

"Desmond: I'm tired of it. All the cryptic warnings. The threats. Just tell us what you want!

William: But they are... "We saw the Nephilim there. We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them." Imagine trying to explain all of this to a two-year-old. To a grasshopper. When they said the will of the gods was unknowable – they meant it. Literally."

William Miles (*AC Encyclopedia*, 186-187) is quoting the book of Numbers. When the Israelites are planning their invasion of Canaan, they send out twelve spies to explore the land and to assess the amount of resistance they will encounter. When they return, they (falsely) report:

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"We can't attack those people because they're too strong compared to us. (...) The land that we've explored is one that devours its inhabitants. All the people whom we observed were giants. We also saw the Nephilim, the descendants of Anak. Compared to the Nephilim, as we see things, we're like grasshoppers, and that's their opinion of us!" (Numbers 13:31-33)

The grasshoppers of William are a reference to a mysterious group only mentioned in Numbers (See above) and Genesis. Just before the Great Flood, Genesis recounts:

"Now after the population of human beings had increased throughout the earth, and daughters had been born to them, some divine beings noticed how attractive human women were, so they took wives for themselves from a selection that pleased them. (...) The Nephilim were on the earth at that time (and also immediately afterward), when those divine beings were having sexual relations with those human women, who gave birth to children for them. These children became the heroes and legendary figures of ancient times."

The origin of these verses is obscure and its exact meaning puzzles Biblical scholars up to the present day (Bosman and Poorthuis 2015). Traditionally there have been two different interpretations of the Nephilim, both directly connected to the identity of their 'fathers', the *bene ha elohim*. Either the Nephilim are the offspring of the sons of Seth (Adam and Eve's third son) or of the 'fallen angels' (from the apostrophic Books of Enoch).

Assassin's Creed turns core stories of the Old Testament inside-out. Adam and Eve were not the first sinners, bringing death and peril upon all their descendants, but the first rebels against their own creators who had designed them and were using them as their slave race. The eating of the apple in Eden marks not the end of human freedom, but the start of human independence. The birth of the two factions fighting each other over the powers of the Pieces of Eden, the Templar Order and the Assassin Brotherhood, is traced to the story of Cain and Abel, i.e. to the very

beginning of human independent enterprise.

The idea of humankind liberating itself from 'divine' enslavement may seem very modern, but it actually has very old roots. Several Gnostic movements from the first millennium of Christendom professed this idea, especially Cainitism (Pearson 2006), Sethianism (Löhr 2006) and, most of all, Marcionism. Founded by Marcion (circa 85-160) in the second century, the Marcionists taught the existence of strong dualism between the good almighty God of Greek philosophy and Christianity, and the dark, evil demiurge-god of the Old Testament, with 'all his anthropomorphic features of wrath, remorse and self-contradiction' (May 2006). This demiurge created the visible world and the human race, as imperfect as he is himself. Gnostic texts from the Nag Hammadi collection such as the *Apocalypse of Adam*, the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Origin of the World* present a reversal of the traditional exegesis of the Genesis story of the Fall. As Bullard (1970, 86) states:

"The snake is (...) is accomplishing something favorable to mankind. The biblical passage has been reversed in it meaning. Since man's creators (...) have forbidden him to eat of the tree of knowledge, or gnosis, then the Spirit must invade the creation by stealth and tempt man to disobey the command, and attain gnosis."

According to Marcion and other Gnostics, the Fall was no fall at all, and disobeying Eden's god was a good thing. Man had to free himself by knowledge of how the world truly works: not operated by 'gods', but by mortal manipulators.

The Shroud of Eden and the New Testament

The most important source of information on the Shroud of Eden, especially before the release of *AC:S* in 2015, is 'Glyph #7' from *AC2*. This particular glyph can be found

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on the north-eastern lighthouse on the Forli map. The seventh Glyph reads as follows:

"First plucked from a tree guarded by a snake, its power performs miracles. Then, worn across the ages, torn asunder, hidden under a sea of red."

Ten famous paintings from European history appear in two rows. Eventually, the player will find out that the five pictures have something in common: all of them depict a red cloak. Four of these paintings concern us for present purposes (the fifth being Jason and the Golden Fleece from Greek mythology): a ceiling painting of Saint Joseph of Egypt (St. Martin's church, Zillis, Switzerland), De Ferrari's *Joseph's Coat Brought to Jacob* (circa 1640), Reni's *David Decapitates Golia* (1606/7), De Juanes' *The Last Supper* (circa 1562) and El Greco's *The Disrobing of Christ* (1577/9).

The connection of these paintings with the Shroud of Eden is not immediately evident. But when the player selects these five paintings from Glyph seven, a new painting appears: *Christ Crucified* by Diego Velázquez (1632). When the player scans Jesus' left hip, he can finally find the element that all the images of the glyph have in common. 'Hidden under a sea of red', as Kaczmarek wrote, the player can now see beneath all the 'red coats' which the paintings have in common. It is no longer a traditional cloak, but a square golden cloth, covered by Isu patterns. The Glyph identifies this cloth as 'ID: Piece of Eden 66 – Shroud'.

Two other clues can be found by scanning Velázquez's *Christ Crucified*. Above Jesus' head, where the letters INRI (*Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews') are traditionally painted, a Templar cross is visible, suggesting that the Templars were involved in the death of Jesus. The same suggestion arises from the hidden text found on Jesus' chest: 'They took it'. 'They' cannot be any other than the

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Templars, and 'it' has to be the Shroud.

All five (four plus one) pictures share a red mantle, and are all connected to famous Biblical stories. The book of Genesis, the first book of the Pentateuch, tells the story of Joseph who is given a 'richly-embroidered tunic' (Genesis 37:3) by his father Jacob. According to the Biblical text, 'Joseph's brothers realized that their father loved [Joseph] more than all of his brothers, they hated him so much that they were unable to speak politely to him.' (Genesis 37:4) Joseph is subsequently sold to slaveholders by his brothers, and he eventually ends up at Pharaoh's court in Egypt. Because of his ability to explain the dreams of the Pharaoh, Joseph succeeds in becoming the viceroy of Egypt, and he subsequently rescues his father and brothers from starvation.

The First Book of Samuel relates the story of one Israelite, David, who takes a stand against the powerful Goliath. Goliath was the champion of the Philistines, and is described as being 'four cubits and a span tall', and as carrying an impressive weaponry and armory (1 Samuel 17:4-7). David, chosen by God to lead the Israelite people as their king-to-be, manages to kill the giant using nothing but a slingshot (17:38-40). As soon as Goliath is dead, David takes a sword and chops off the head of his slain enemy (17:51).

The three paintings of Jesus depict central stages in his life as it is described in the New Testament: the famous Last Supper (Mathew 26:17-30, Mark 14:12-26, Luke 22:7-39 and John 13:1-17:26), Jesus' disrobing before his crucifixion (John 19:23-24; cf. Mathew 27:35; Luke 23,34), and his crucifixion itself (Mathew 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 25:33; John 19:18). In all three instances, Jesus is depicted wearing a (red) robe. The hint contained in the words 'They took it', which can be found in Velázquez's

Christ Crucified, is an interesting detail. Jesus' robe is explicitly mentioned in the crucifixion story in all four canonical Gospels.

"When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier, and took his cloak as well. The cloak was seamless, woven in one piece from the top down. So they told each other, 'Let's not tear it. Instead, let's throw dice to see who gets it.' (...) So that is what the soldiers did." (John 19:23-24; cf. Mathew 27:35; Luke 23:34)

Jesus' crucifixion appears as the work of the Templars, who are trying to get hold of Jesus' garment, one of the Pieces of Eden. Glyph seven suggests that the extraordinary actions ascribed to Joseph, David and Jesus in the Biblical accounts of the Old and New Testament are not to be credited to divine interference or to the protagonists' own supernatural capacities, but to the powers of one of the Pieces of Eden, the Shroud of Eden. These hints, in combination with the information from AC:S, leads to the almost certain identification of the Shroud of Eden from Assassin's Creed with the Shroud of Turin in the real world. In AC:S, Henry Green describes the Shroud as 'said to heal the sick' and as supposedly 'bringing people back from the dead'. Furthermore, one of AC:S' main antagonists, Lucy Thorne, is described in the in-game biography as being obsessed with the Shroud of Turin.

The Shroud of Turin is a rectangular piece of woven cloth, approximately 4.4x1.1 meters. Its most distinctive characteristic is the faint, brownish image of a front and back view of a naked man with his hands folded across his groin. While radiocarbon dating seems to have shown that the shroud material dates to 1260-1309 and not to the beginning of the common era (Damon et al. 1989), many Christians continue to believe that this cloth is the actual shroud in which Jesus was buried after his crucifixion (Mathew 27:59; Mark 15:46, Luke 25:53; John 19:40).

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The history of the Shroud of Turin is 'shrouded' in mystery (Nicolotti 2014). From 1390 on, its history is well know, but the period prior to that year is subject to debate and controversies (Meacham 1983). More daring authors have suggested the Shroud was once in the possession of the Order of Knights Templar (Frale 2012). Geoffroi de Charny (1300-1356) is often named as the first historically verifiable owner of the cloth. As Geoffroi's supposed uncle of the same name (+ 1314) was a Knight Templar who was burned at the stake, the association between the Order and the Shroud was easily made (Nickell 1998).

The connection between the Templars and the Shroud in the Assassin's Creed series is far from original. Nor is the suggestion raised by the Assassin's Creed's narrative original that Jesus possessed a Piece of Eden – the Shroud of Eden – with which he tried to survive his crucifixion (successfully or not). This idea is known as the 'swoon hypothesis', the notion that Jesus never really died on the cross. He simply swooned or fainted. The Roman soldiers, incorrectly assuming he was already dead, then released the body for burial. Jesus was subsequently placed in a tomb, perhaps in a comatose state, where he was revived by the cold air and/or with help of his friends, who are not uncommonly identified as Essenes (Straus 2011 and Habermas 1996). A considerable number of books has been published on the basis of the swoon hypothesis, sometimes truly scholarly works, but mostly works of the popular pseudoscientific genre: from Karl Bahrdt's Ausführung Des Plans Und Zwecks Jesu (1784) and Heinrich Paulus' Philologisch-kritischer und historischer Kommentar über das neue Testament (1802) to Hugh Schonfield's The Passover Plot (1965), Barbara Thiering's Jesus the Man (1992) and Michael Baigent's The Jesus Papers (2006). The swoon hypothesis has been disproved time and time again as historically highly unlikely by scholars as far back as David Friedrich Strauss (1840) and Albert Schweitzer (1906), but it seems never to have lost its appeal to the public.

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The details of the swoon hypothesis differ, but the common idea is the same: Jesus did not die on the cross, whether deliberately or by accident. The means by which Jesus wanted to survive his own violent execution on the cross range from herbs to medicines. And his accomplices are identified as groups such as the mysterious Essenes or individuals such as Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus or even the Evangelist Luke, who was traditionally believed to be a physician (Weissenrieder 2003). The *Assassin's Creed's* interpretation of the 'Shroud' fits perfectly into this framework. Jesus survived – or at least tried to survive – his crucifixion by means of a magical object, a Piece of Eden, that had been used earlier by Joseph and David.

There is, however, more to the story of *Assassin's Creed*. Jesus' miracles are also associated with the Pieces of Eden, much earlier in the game than *AC:S*. In *AC1*, the leader of the Assassin Brotherhood, Al Mualim, speaks of Jesus as 'a poor carpenter':

"This piece of silver cast out Adam and Eve, turned staves into snakes, parted and closed the Red Sea. Paris used it to start the Trojan War. And made a poor carpenter turn water into wine" (Memory block #5)

Al Mualim refers to yet another Piece of Eden – probably a 'Staff of Eden' – which is responsible for a different series of miracle stories from Biblical and Hellenistic mythology. Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden because they stole a piece of Eden from the Isu, thus starting the revolution of humankind against its oppressors (as we have explained in more detail earlier in this article). The 'snakes turned into staves' and the parting/closing of the Red Sea are references to two episodes in the book of Exodus. Moses changes Aaron's and his own staves into snakes in front of Pharaoh (Exodus 7:10-12). Both staves were also used, according to the Biblical story, to part the Red Sea to grant the fleeing Jews a save passage (Exodus 14:15-16.22).

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If Joseph became viceroy of Egypt thanks to the Shroud of Eden, Moses was able to escape hostile Egypt several hundreds of years later by means of another Piece of Eden. The mention of the 'poor carpenter', in its turn, who changed 'water into wine', is no doubt a reference to one of Jesus' reported miracles known as the 'Marriage of Cana', only told in the Gospel of John (2:1-12). The 'carpenter' is a reference to the (supposed) profession of his father Joseph of Nazareth (Mathew 13:55; Mark 6:3).

Al Mualim interprets Biblical (and Hellenistic) miracle stories as if they were the result of the power of the Pieces of Eden, just as AC did in the case of the Shroud of Eden. Glyph 7 (*AC2*) suggests that Jesus used a Piece of Eden, the Shroud, to survive his execution, while Al Mualim (*AC1*) suggests that Jesus also used (another?) Piece of Eden, perhaps the Staff, to perform his other miracles. Henry Green hinted at the 'illusionary' quality of the Shroud in *AC:S*, as Al Mualim did in *AC1*.

"The Red Sea was never parted. Water never turned to wine. Illusions, all of them." (Memory Block #7)

Al Mualim reframes his earlier statements about the power of the Pieces of Eden used by Moses and Jesus. They did not actually perform the reported actions (the parting of the sea, changing of the water into wine), but only created illusions in the minds of the spectators. The Pieces of Eden, in Al Mualim's view, are more about mind-control than about controlling the natural world.

The interpretation of Jesus' miracles, especially his survival of the crucifixion, as illusionary is intriguing in the context of the *Assassin's Creed* series in general, but in particular in the context of Al Mualim and the Assassin Brotherhood (*AC Encyclopedia*, 207). Al Mualim is the *nom de guerre* of Rashid ad-Din Sinan (1132/5-

1192), leader of the Assassins of Masyaf in Western Syria. Sinan was head of the Syrian branch of the Nizari Isma'ilis, a radical group of Shiite Muslims'. These hashishiyya (a pejorative noun meaning 'hash eaters', equivalent to the modern English word 'rabble') used assassination as one of their key instruments to seize political power in any given area, leading in both European and Arabian fantasy to an image of incredibly masterful daredevils who were responsible for the deaths of hundreds of Muslim and Christian nobles.

Al Mualim, being a Shiite Muslim, seems to echo orthodox Islamic theology concerning the crucifixion of Jesus. According to Islamic theology, Jesus was saved rather than killed on the cross. 'It was made to appear to them' (Q:4:157) that he had been killed (Akhtar 2008). Even more intriguingly, Islamic theology agrees with the even older Christian heresy of Docetism (Lawson 2009). As Urban von Wahlde (2015, 63) defines:

"As a Christian heresy, [Docetism] sought to 'protect' the divinity of Christ by diminishing (or denying) the human aspect of Jesus."

According to the Docetists, Jesus (as the Christ) only *appeared* to live historically. Consequently, Jesus' death at the cross was a 'fake' death. As Kelly (2009, 34) explains:

"Docetists believed that a spiritual being like God would be corrupted by contact with a fleshly body (...) [Jesus] did not have a real body but only "seemed" to. The Greek word for "seem", is dokéo, hence "Docetism"."

Not inconsequently, the abovementioned doctrine of Marcionism also incorporates traces of Docetism. According to Marcion, Christ did in fact manifest himself in human form, but he did not have a human body (Moll 2010 and May 2006).

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Marcion's Docetic Christology is not very surprising, as 'his' Christ could not be linked in any way to the lesser, lower, material created world, let alone be involved in the climax of materialistic behavior, sexuality, pregnancy and child-birth. The most important difference between classic Docetism and *Assassin's Creed* is that, for the Docetists, Jesus was *too divine* to hang and die on a cross, whereas in AC mythology Jesus was *too human* in trying to overcome the shortcomings of human life by means of an Isu artifact.

In the end, all Pieces of Eden come together for a radical reinterpretation of the miracles of the Old and New Testament, a reinterpretation with many historical sources, including Sethism, Docetism, Marcionism and Islamic theological doctrine, and pseudoscientific popular literature.

The 'Theology' of the Assassin's Creed Game Series

This article has described and analyzed the process of reinterpretation of the traditional Christian tradition in the *Assassin's Creed* game series. It has done so at four different levels. At the level of anthropogenesis, the traditional view of the creation of humankind by the God of Jewish and Christian monotheism is exchanged for a more immanent and naturalistic perspective in which humankind is genetically engineered by supreme (but not omnipotent or immortal) beings, known as the First Civilization.

Consequently, at a teleological level, the ultimate destiny of humankind is not to restore the original peace and tranquility of the Eden paradise which has been lost by man's disobedience in respect of God's commandment (as is taught in Jewish and Christian tradition), but to gain, hold and develop human freedom, which was stolen

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from the supreme being who created mankind. This is done by gaining as much knowledge (*gnosis*) as possible about the true origins of humankind.

At a third level, the history of humankind from its beginnings to the present day is reinterpreted as an ongoing and eternal battle between two factions, the Templars and the Assassins, each striving for dominance by trying to harvest the power of the artifacts left by the First Civilization after its collective extinction, objects known as the Pieces of Eden. The Templar Order strives for world peace and cosmic balance by controlling all domains of human life (with dictatorial consequences), while the Assassin Brotherhood tries to optimize the freedom of every man and woman individually and humankind collectively (with anarchical consequences). Every major happening in the traditional Christian tradition is recontextualized as a stage in this battle between Templars and Assassins.

At the fourth level, the *Assassin's Creed* series opts for a radically immanent Christological viewpoint. Jesus of Nazareth is in no way seen as a divine being, nor as the Son of God, but as a man like all other men, in possession of an Isu artifact, the Shroud of Eden. He uses this to stage the miracles that are recounted in the New Testament gospels, and tries – successfully or not – to survive his own execution. In the words of Al Mualim, Jesus was no more than a 'poor carpenter'.

This radical reinterpretation of traditional Christian mythology contains traces of earlier heterodox Christian beliefs, Islamic theological thinking and pseudoscientific modern literature. Within the Gnostic Christianity of the first millennium AD, several groups held beliefs about the origins of humankind that are similar to those of *Assassin's Creed*'s allohistory. Sethinism and Marcionism in particular preached the idea that the 'eating of the apple' in Eden was not a sin, but a spiritual liberation from

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the clutches of the evil, lesser god who is thought to be described in the Old Testament. The idea of Docetism can also be found in *Assassin's Creed* – the idea that Jesus did not actually suffer and/or die on the cross. Docetism can be found both in Gnostic theology and in Islamic tradition on the crucifixion of Jesus.

And finally, some interesting parallels between the *Assassin's Creed* narrative and pseudoscientific modern literature have been discovered. The whole idea that Jesus could have survived (deliberately or not) his own execution by means of herbs or other treatments, the so-called swoon hypothesis, is a *topos* that can be repeatedly found in non-academic literature at least since the end of the eighteenth century, up to the beginning of the third millennium.

All in all, the meta-narrative of the first *Assassin's Creed* series, known as the 'Desmond Saga', produces a radically immanent and rationalistic perspective on traditional Christian mythology. Monotheistic religion – whether it be Judaism, Christianity or Islam – seems to be nothing more than an obscuring of the 'real truth'. There is no reference to a God (only fake godheads manipulating mankind), to the sacred, the transcendent or the numinous. *Assassin's Creed*'s vision of monotheistic religion in general, and of traditional Christian tradition specifically, is immanent and functionalist.

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'Assassin's Creed: Project Legacy was a single-player browser-based role-playing game for Facebook, designed by Ubisoft to promote the game Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood. The game is mostly text-based, but also included pictures and video files. Unfortunately, the game is now offline and therefore no longer available to the public. However, a lot of information is conserved for further study by the community-based Assassin's Creed Wikia: http://assassinscreed.wikia.com/wiki/Assassin's_Creed:_Project_Legacy. Assassin's Creed: Initiates is a community-oriented project founded by Ubisoft in 2012, including news, forums, links, store and – most importantly for this article – an integral timeline of the series' chronology. The Initiates project is still available: http://acinitiates.com. For a detailed account of all the individual games and books of the game series, see: Veugen (2011).

"The Encyclopedia only contains information concerning the games within the 'Desmond Saga', that is, up to Assassin's Creed III in 2012. In this article, this Encyclopedia will be regarded as an 'canonical' and (therefore) as a authorative source of information concerning the fictional Assassin's Creed universe. Many aspects and details of this universe are scattered through the games and other additional media and are frequently (and maybe intentionally) kept vague. The Encyclopedia structurizes these asepcts in one more or less coherent discourse.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this article, I will concentrate on (traditional) Christian tradition, mythology and theology, contrasting these with the *Assassin's Creed* narrative. This includes stories and texts from Judaism, especially the Torah (preserved in the Christian Bible as the 'Old Testament'). Therefore, in this article, these originally Jewish texts will be discussed in their Christian interpretation.

^{iv} All Biblical quotations are from the International Standard Version.

^v For further information on the Nizari Isma'ilis, see: Bartlett 2001, Bosman 2016, Burman 1987, Daftary 1998 and 1994, Lewis 1967 and Mirza 1997.