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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.

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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?"

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).ⁱ And (3) Ubisoft's own *Assassin's Creed Encyclopedia* (2013).ⁱⁱ The main *Assassin's Creed* games are single-payer, third-person, stealth and parkour games set in different historical settings, played on multiple

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

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

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

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 safe passage (Exodus 14:15-16.22).

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-

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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ⁱ *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).

ⁱⁱ 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 authoritative 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 aspects 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.