

The Cult and Representation of the Archangel Raphael in Sixteenth-Century Venice

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For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways

Psalm 91:11

Today the concept of the guardian angel tends to be thought of as an 'old' idea, but there is little indication that the belief achieved any widespread liturgical or artistic attention before around 1600. However, the largely forgotten cult of the Archangel Raphael, to which the concept of the guardian angel is closely linked, predates it by some length. This article considers how popular devotion to one specific angel developed into a more general belief in angelic intervention, through an examination of the iconography associated with the Archangel Raphael in sixteenth-century Venice. The understanding and representation of the role of guardian angels is examined, and I show how the imagery developed from the iconography of Raphael and his relationship with his attribute Tobias. In addition, I examine how the effect of Protestant criticism of the cult of saints — of angels in particular — and the efficacy of prayer affected the cult of Raphael and the saint's representation in Venice.

The Archangel Raphael is mentioned by name only in the deutrocanonical book of Tobit.¹ There he is described as being disguised as a human and accompanies the young Tobias and his dog on a journey to reclaim some borrowed money for Tobit, Tobias' father, who is old, blind and poor. Along the way they catch a monstrous fish and then use its heart and liver to banish a demon from Sarah, who is then given in matrimony to Tobias. Upon their return home, Raphael uses the fish's gall to cure Tobit of blindness, before disappearing.

In the early twentieth century a number of articles addressed the late-fifteenth-century tradition of images featuring Raphael and Tobias in Florence. Gombrich reevaluated images such as *Tobias and the Angel* (c. 1470-75) by Andrea Verrocchio's workshop. This painting, and others like it produced around the same time, had previously been understood as a votive picture intended to ensure the safe return of merchants' sons who were venturing out on their maiden voyages. The narrative incongruities of these images meant that they came under criticism because they seemed ill designed as illustrations of the story of Tobias and the Angel. The monstrous fish is frequently represented as a perfectly normal size and still intact, despite the box carried by Raphael which contains its entrails: meanwhile, the angel supposedly disguised as a human is always shown displaying his wings and is in one example even accompanied by the other archangels. Gombrich demonstrated that

critics were misreading these images, and suggested that they were never intended as straight illustrations of the biblical story. Rather, the incongruities present in the images emphasised their symbolic purpose, which allowed the viewer to recognise the people portrayed. Gombrich asserted that the images were not about Tobias at all, arguing instead that he was included as an attribute of Raphael rather than as the subject of the painting.² Cima da Conegliano's *Tobias and the Angel with St James and Nicholas* (1513-1515) [Fig. 1] can be read in this way.³ In this painting, Tobias is included to allow us to identify Raphael in much the same way that St Nicholas' golden orbs and St James' staff allow us to identify them, and it would not be a fair reading to argue that the image made less sense because of the inclusion of these anachronistic saints. Nevertheless, Tobias is not just an attribute, but has another role to play that is vital in the development of the representation of Raphael and guardian

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Fig. 1. Cima da Conegliano, *Raphael and Tobias between Saints James and Nicholas*, 1513-15. Oil on panel transferred to canvas. Courtesy of Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Storici di Venezia.

angels in Renaissance Venice.

Gombrich's innovation was to suggest that the Archangel Raphael was venerated in much the same way as any other cult figure, and for the same reasons — in the hope of heavenly intervention in this world and the next. The Archangel's celestial nature made no real difference to how his cult was treated by the church and the laity when compared to other canonised and more terrestrial saints. In fact, 'San Raffaele' appeared regularly in calendars of saints; and confraternities, churches and altars were dedicated to him. The feast of Raphael was late, infrequent and often inconsistent in date. It is found from the tenth century onwards, but only in the

fifteenth century does it proliferate in the diocesan rights. Since 1921 it has been fixed on 24 October, but differing dioceses often had different dates — its appearance in 1445 in Hereford, England, for example, set the feast on 5 October. The feast of the guardian angels on 2 October was added to the General Calendar only in 1608.⁴ Confraternities dedicated to the Archangel were also not uncommon: there was a famous youth confraternity at Florence, three societies in Venice by 1700, and at least one in Rome.⁵ The first confraternity dedicated to Raphael in Venice was founded in 1280 at the parish church of San Raffaele, the second was established at San Apostoli in 1658 and, as we will see, was dedicated to guardian angels more generally. Nevertheless his cult remained a small one — especially in comparison to his brother Archangel Michael, who was the dedicatee of three churches in Venice alone.⁶ In Venice, Raphael was included in calendars from the thirteenth century and across the city there were at least nine altars dedicated to him by 1581.⁷ Perhaps most significantly, the church of San Raffaele had existed at the very least since 1131, although legends suggest it may have been established as early as the seventh century.⁸

The Archangel could make some bold claims as a miracle worker on behalf of the faithful. Although Raphael is mentioned only in the Book of Tobit, a rich tradition associates him with anonymous angels across the Old and New Testaments. He was thought to have been the unnamed angel who regularly stirred the waters of the Probatica pool (John 5:1-5) which healed those who touched it. As well as curing the blindness of Tobit and banishing a demon from Sarah before binding it under the desert, he was also thought to have banished nine-tenths of the unclean spirits of Noah's day, to have "charge of all human disease," to have healed Abraham's painful circumcision and rescued Lot from Sodom.⁹ Raphael's powers of intercession on behalf of the faithful are asserted by his own words in the Book of Tobit. At 12:15 he explicitly states that he presents the prayers of the faithful to God; he thus came to be associated with the Angel in Revelation 8:3-4 who stands with a censer praying to God for the people of earth.¹⁰ Principally he was seen as a healer, whose Hebrew name even means 'God has healed' — this is a role he clearly plays in the Book of Tobit.¹¹ Amongst the earliest recorded images of the Archangel, discovered in 1516 but now lost, was an ancient fresco in Palermo in which he was designated as '*medicus*.'¹²

In Venice, the Archangel Raphael's powers as a thaumaturge were further demonstrated by a legend describing that his special job was to restrain the harmful influence of the evil spirits which caused storms and other dangers to travellers. There is an inscription under a stone relief of Raphael on the Ducal Palace that asks: "Oh, Venerable Raphael, make thou the gulf calm, we beseech thee."¹³ Given his protection of Tobias on his journey, it is no surprise that Raphael assumed responsibility for the protection of the ferrymen in the lagoon.¹⁴ Cima's altarpiece in the Venice Accademia also associates the angel with two other saints whose job it was to protect travellers — St James the Greater and St Nicholas. The Archangel thus had a formidable record as a miracle worker and intercessor on behalf of his human wards, and it is

no surprise that he was the subject of veneration.¹⁵

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Cima also painted an altarpiece for the church of Santa Maria dei Carmini dedicated to the Archangel in around 1511.¹⁶ This altarpiece depicts the *Adoration of the Shepherds with other saints* [Fig. 2] and is still in its original location on the south wall of the Venetian church. A standard ‘liturgical interpretation’ of many nativity scenes for altarpieces would describe the importance of the incarnation and of Christ’s sacrifice. This is usually associated with the Virgin Mary who carried within her the child and is thus seen as a prototype of the church itself, which also houses the Eucharist and the promise of salvation. She and the Child wait passively for the adoring shepherd whose act of supplication echoes that of the laity who could look at the closely linked pair of mother and Child when the host is raised and consecrated during the mass. Although the depiction of the infant child whose sacrifice is

Fig. 2. Cima da Conegliano, *Adoration of the Shepherds with other Saints*, c. 1511. Tempera on panel. Courtesy of Cameraphoto.

foretold by St Helena’s cross is pertinent to the masses that were regularly performed for the souls of the patrons Giovanni and Caterina Calvo, the contents of the text of the feast of St Raphael may also have influenced the imagery in this work.

Unsurprisingly, the text of the liturgy for the Feast of St Raphael quotes the Book of Tobit, but significantly the Epistle of the mass is taken from chapter 12, in which Raphael explains that he is one of seven angels who stand in the presence of God and that he prays for his young ward.¹⁷ The second and third nocturns use a sermon by St Augustine on Tobias and John 5 respectively. The latter thus tacitly ratifies the link between the angel of the Probatina pool and St Raphael and stresses the healing role of the angel.¹⁸ St Augustine’s text links the powers of healing with the instructional role of Raphael and the blindness of Tobit. Raphael is explicitly invoked as a physician (“*nostrae salutis medicus*”) who can lead us from blindness into light.¹⁹ The suggestion is not only that Raphael can and will take care of one’s physical

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body during one's life, but he will also lead one to the light after death. Combined with his unique proximity to God, Raphael is an extremely powerful intercessor on behalf of the deceased concerned for the progress of their soul through purgatory. We could almost see Raphael as a Christian Virgil from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, who leads Calvo through purgatory to the walled Jerusalem in Cima's landscape, or draw parallels to Plato's 'allegory of the cave' in Book Seven of *The Republic*.

It is in his role as both instructor and healer that we see Raphael displayed in Cima's *Adoration of the Shepherds* in the Carmini. The angel unambiguously leads Tobias by the hand out of the cave behind them, while instructing

Fig. 3. Titian, *Tobias and the Angel*, c. 1514. Oil on panel. Courtesy of Soprintendenza ai Beni Artistici e Storici di Venezia.

him about the Christological schema that is working itself out in front of them. It is thus no surprise that Raphael leads Tobias into the Adoration of the shepherds, a scene redolent with themes of the realisation of salvation for the humble herdsman — a realisation in which Giovanni and Caterina Calvo hope to partake. It is difficult to know, given that the liturgy and the preachings of St Augustine were in Latin, how familiar either the donors or Cima would have been with this particular interpretation. Nevertheless, the combined roles of protective traveller and intercessor inherent in the story could hardly fail to impress themselves on the general laity in Renaissance Venice.

St Raphael can also be seen in the role of saintly intercessor in other altarpieces painted over the following years, such as Titian's *Tobias and the Angel* (1520s) for Santa Caterina [Fig. 3]. Titian's painting also clearly places the compositional emphasis on the figure of Raphael rather than the boy.²⁰ Titian and his studio painted a more celebrated altarpiece for San Marziale [Fig. 4], which is very closely related to the San Caterina work.²¹ Compositionally similar, the angel dominates the picture field, directing the attention of Tobias with an outstretched arm. In his hand he holds the pot of fish entrails with which he will perform the feats of healing.

In these examples the relationship between the angel and his charge is clear. The Archangel turns to the boy and appears to be instructing him. Although the emphasis is on the abilities of the angel as an intercessor on behalf of the laity, the

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role of Tobias is not simply that of a dumb ‘badge’ used to unambiguously identify the angel from his peers. In every case, the angel engages with his ward and appears to be telling him something, indicating that the instructional role of Raphael and his relationship with Tobias was important.

Raphael was the foremost example of a ‘guardian angel’ and was used as an argument to support the belief in the doctrine of guardian angels. The concept, based primarily on Psalm 91:11, Matthew 18:10 and the story of Tobias, had a long pedigree, but only in the sixteenth century, in response to the Protestant condemnation of the cult of saints and the belief in the intercession of angels and saints, did it develop and spread.²² The feast had been promoted by Spanish dioceses and the Jesuits following its condemnation by the Protestants. The Jesuits had popularised a thrice daily prayer to

Fig. 4. Titian, *Tobias and the Angel*, c. 1550. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Archivio Fotografico Scala, Florence.

the guardian angels: “Angel of God, to whom I am confided for celestial happiness, illuminate me today, guard me, direct me, govern me.”²³ The text is clearly focused on celestial reward and guidance, rather than the healing emphasised in the earlier cult of Raphael.

The story of Tobit made Raphael an excellent candidate for recognition as a ‘guardian angel’ and thus he came to be the prototype and chief representative of that type. The cult of guardian angels was assisted in the development of its post-Reformation form by its addition, on 27 September 1608, to the general calendar by Pope Paul V.²⁴ At the heart of the debate was the concept of free will in determining one’s state of grace and thus access to heaven — both Luther and Calvin denied that this was possible, while the Catholics continued to believe that it was. The angel, by being a guide towards salvation but not ultimately able to force a person to take the correct path, is an excellent metaphor for the Catholic belief in self determined election; in other words, the role of free will and good works in attaining salvation through the guidance of the church and the grace of God.

In Venice, the development of the cult of Raphael along these lines was first given visual expression when the Patriarch Giovanni Tiepolo constructed an altar dedicated to the guardian angels in the Crociferi (now Gesuiti) in 1619, decorated with an altarpiece by Palma Giovane [Fig. 5]. In 1657 a confraternity was established in San Apostolo, with a meeting house on the Strada Nova. This second confraternity was explicitly dedicated to the guardian angels (note the plural) rather than to St Raphael the Archangel specifically, as the earlier confraternity at San Raffaele had been.²⁵ The meeting house on the Strada Nova is decorated with a statue of Raphael and Tobias, and Sebastiano Ricci completed an altarpiece featuring the pair for the upper Hall. The confraternity also maintain an altar in San Apostoli which was decorated by Francesco Maffei in 1657.²⁶

The 1619 altarpiece in the Gesuiti by Palma Giovane makes an extremely interesting contrast with the early altarpieces by Titian and Cima. There are a multitude of angels counselling various young people and drawing a number of them

up into the heavenly realms above. A hundred years before this a depiction of an angel with a child would certainly have been identified as Raphael and Tobias — even without the further attributes of the fish, dog and the pot of entrails. In Palma's altarpiece, however, one pair of figures on the far left are clearly accompanied by a dog and fish, while the others are not. The couple on the left are Raphael and Tobias while the other figures are various anonymous souls who are being guided by their angels to take the right path to their heavenly rewards. The dedication of the altar to guardian angels is reflected by the compositional importance of an anonymous angel and an anonymous soul — rather than the sidelined Raphael and Tobias. One could

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Fig. 5. Jacopo Palma il Giovane, *Guardian Angels*, c. 1690. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of Osvaldo Böhm, Venice.

argue that the figures of Raphael and Tobias have been included off to one side to eliminate the possibility in the viewer's mind that the foremost couple are intended to represent this more famous pair. Importantly, the boy at the front points down off the canvas suggesting that his course of action is still bound in an earthly direction, while the angel points upward. The user of the altarpiece is surely being invited to pray for the souls of the undecided that they may yet choose the right path, with the help of their guardian angel. The altarpiece represents the tangible shift in the cult of Raphael. Although he remained a key figure and was the principal representative of the guardian angels as a type, it was Raphael's role as a guardian through the choices taken in life and into the next life that emerged as the preeminent aspects of his cult in the Post-Reformation world.

In response to the reformation's condemnation of catholic theology, the cult of St Raphael adapted and expanded to represent the concerns of a new age. The emphasis has moved from intercession in *this* world to intercession for the next. The cult of St Raphael as a healer and intercessor has been effectively superseded by a new cult — that of guardian angels in general — of which Raphael is the most preeminent example. The plight of the young people in Palma's altarpiece are a perfect synecdoche for all of us in our journey into the afterlife, and are simultaneously an excellent metaphor for, and a dramatic celebration of, free will in the operation of divine grace. The visual imagery of Cima's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Titian's two altarpieces and Palma's *Guardian Angels* reflect changing devotional and theological beliefs: indeed, they propagate the belief in the roles and powers of saintly intercession and self determination.

- 1 The Book of Tobit and a number of other Old Testament books included in the Vulgate and the authoritative Douay Rheims translation are omitted from the vast majority of protestant Bibles — and are usually described as ‘Apocrypha’. In the Catholic tradition they are referred to as ‘deuterocanonical’ and were considered to have spiritual value but were not canonical. C. A. Moore, *Tobit: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996) passim.
- 2 E. H. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images: Studies in the Art of the Renaissance* (London: Phaidon, 1972) 27. See also T. Hart, ‘Tobit in the Art of the Florentine Renaissance,’ in M. Bredin, ed., *Studies in the Book of Tobit: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2006). For an example of the earlier interpretation see G. M. Achenbach, ‘The Iconography of Tobias and the Angel in Florentine Painting of the Renaissance,’ *Marsyas*, Vol. 3 (1943-45). For a recent article on the imagery of St Raphael in Verona see A. Serafini, ‘Giovanni Francesco Caroto in Sant’Eufemia a Verona. Gli affreschi con le Storie di Tobia e la pala con i Tre arcangeli del Museo di Castelvecchio,’ *Venezia Cinquecento: Studi di storia dell’arte e della cultura*, Vol. 19 (2009).
- 3 S. M. Marconi, *Gallerie dell’Accademia di Venezia: Opere d’Arte dei Secoli XIV e XV* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1955) 116. P. Humfrey, *Cima da Conegliano* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 150-1. G. C. F. Villa, ed., *Cima da Conegliano: Poeta del paesaggio* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010) 210, cat. no. 54.
- 4 *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, X:1365-66. A. A. King, *Liturgies of the Past* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1959) 360.
- 5 S. Gramigna and A. Perissa, *Scuole di arti mestieri e devozione a venezia* (Venice: Arsenale Cooperativa, 1981) 112. R. Cobianchi, ‘Raphael, Ceremonial Banners and Devotional Prints: New Light on Città di Castello’s Nicholas of Tolentino Altarpiece,’ in L. Bourdua and A. Dunlop, eds., *Art and the Augustinian Order in Early Renaissance Italy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). Hart, ‘Tobit’. Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*. G. Vio, *Le scuole piccole nella Venezia dei dogi: note d’archivio per la storia delle confraternite veneziane* (Vicenza: A. Colla, 2004) 173-74, 577-78, 808-09.
- 6 D. H. Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 368. A. Butler, H. Thurston, and D. Attwater, *Butler’s Lives of the Saints* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1956) III:677. S. Tramontin, et al., *Culto dei Santi a Venezia* (Venice: Studium Cattolico Veneziano, 1965) 315. A. Zorzi, *Venezia scomparsa* (Milan: Electa, 1984) 206-08.
- 7 Tramontin et al., *Culto dei Santi*, 317. P. Humfrey, *The Altarpiece in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 64.
- 8 Tramontin et al., *Culto dei Santi*, 161-62. G. Lorenzetti, *Venice and its Lagoon: Historical-Artistic Guide*, J. Guthrie, trans., (Trieste: Lint, 1975) 557-59. *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1961-1987) X:1360.
- 9 Moore, *Tobit*, 160-61.
- 10 Tobit 12:15 and Revelation 8:3-4. Butler, Thurston, and Attwater, *Butler’s Lives*, IV:187.
- 11 Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 27. Butler, Thurston, and Attwater, *Butler’s Lives*, IV:187. L. Menzies, *The Saints in Italy: A Book of Reference to the Saints in Italian Art and Dedication* (London: Medici Society, 1924) 376. Farmer, *Dictionary of Saints*, (1997) 423.
- 12 *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, X:1360.

- 13 The original reads: “EFICE Q/SOFRE/TÜR AFA/EL REVE/RENDE QUIETÜ” or “Effice (quceso?) Fretum, Raphael reverende, quietum.” J. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice* (London: George Allen, 1905) II:311. *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, X:1362.
- 14 Tramontin et al., *Culto dei Santi*, 162.
- 15 Menzies, *The Saints in Italy*, 376.
- 16 For the controversial dedication of this altarpiece see A. Gentili, ‘Painting in Venice: 1450-1515,’ in G. Romanelli, ed., *Venice: Art and Architecture* (Cologne: Könemann Verlagsgesellschaft, 1997) I:299. C. C. Wilson, *St Joseph in Italian Renaissance Society and Art: New Directions and Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2001) 89-93. Humfrey, *Cima da Conegliano*, 161-62, cat. no. 58. Villa, ed. *Cima da Conegliano*, 204, cat. no. 51.
- 17 *Bibliotheca Sanctorum*, X:1365-66. King, *Liturgies*, 360.
- 18 Butler, Thurston, and Attwater, *Butler’s Lives*, IV:187. See also J. Driscoll, ‘St Raphael’ in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12640b.html> (accessed 30 March 2010). The Official Liturgy thus confirms the conjecture of popular opinion.
- 19 Gombrich, *Symbolic Images*, 27.
- 20 The attribution is often disputed. H. E. Wethey, *The Paintings of Titian* (London: Phaidon, 1969) I:179, cat. no. X-39.
- 21 This painting was dated by Vasari to 1507 but that chronology is highly problematic. A date of c. 1520 is more usual. *Ibid.*, I:162, cat. no. 145.
- 22 Psalm 90 in the Vulgate. P. Marshall and A. Walsham, ‘Migrations of angels in the early modern world,’ in P. Marshall and A. Walsham, eds., *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 13.
- 23 T. Johnson, ‘Guardian angels and the Society of Jesus,’ in P. Marshall and A. Walsham, eds., *Angels in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 211.
- 24 T. Gilmartin, ‘Feast of Guardian Angels’ in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910) <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07050a.html> (accessed 23 April 2011). Johnson ‘Guardian angels,’ 192.
- 25 Gramigna and Perissa, *Scuole*, 112-13. Vio, *Le scuole piccole nella Venezia*, 577-78.
- 26 Gramigna and Perissa, *Scuole*, 112-13. J. Daniels, *Sebastiano Ricci* (Hove: Wayland Publishers, 1976) 133-34, cat. no. 460.