

Medieval Abraham: between fleshly patriarch
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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Jérôme Baschet

Abraham, patriarch of Old Testament, was to have a distinctive destiny in

medieval Christian images. It often fell to him to represent heaven, the place of celestial reward, the ultimate aim of Christian life. Small children in the Bosom of Abraham symbolise future glory and eternal rest. This image is used symptomatically by E. Mâle in his introduction to *The Gothic Image* to illustrate the conventional workings of medieval art. E. Mâle, puzzled by the strange image, soon qualified it as “une figure archaïque et naïve” or “une sorte de hiéroglyphe.”¹ While I hope to show that the Bosom of Abraham is in fact a lot more, I must stress that the research I’m presenting here in outline falls within a problematic framework which concerns both history of art and history generally.²

This research focuses on medieval representations of divine kinship. It postulates the idea that the network of kinship plays a major, structuring role in the medieval world, in the organisation of society as well as in its representations.³ I must therefore illustrate succinctly **[End Page 738]** three important points before turning to the Bosom of Abraham.

Firstly, the institution of divine fatherhood. All Christians are the children of God. They have a father in heaven.⁴ This is the meaning of the *Pater Noster*, one of the principal Christian prayers, spoken by Christ in Matthew chapter 6, verses 9 to 13. Two consequences mentioned in the Gospel itself follow on from divine fatherhood: the first is the belittling of blood ties, or fleshly kinship, as when Christ refuses to recognise his mother and brethren (Matthew 12, 46–50); the second, on the other hand, is that the disciples, all being the sons of God, are linked by brotherly ties. This is what may be termed as the general-germane ties of all Christians. These characteristics occur throughout ecclesiastical thought and within the organisation of Christian society itself. Through baptism, a fundamental rite which constitutes a symbolic and social birth, the individual, who is the fruit of the flesh and therefore of sin, is reborn as a child of God. Baptism is an act of adoption on God’s behalf.⁵ It may also be described as spiritual fertilisation, the seed of the Holy Spirit coming to fertilise the water in the baptismal fonts, as in the “*uterus matris ecclesiae*.”⁶

Secondly, the importance of spiritual kinship in medieval society. J.

Goody and G. Duby in particular have shown that the effort made by the Church to impose its social superiority consisted largely of vigorous intervention where ties of kinship were concerned, especially during two particularly conflictual phases in the fourth and fifth centuries and again in the eleventh and twelfth.⁷ Apart from [End Page 739] asserting that marriage be monogamous, indissoluble and strongly exogamic, the most original aspect of the Christian order is the development of different types of spiritual kinship, especially the ties of patronage (godparents and godchildren) and those of confraternities.⁸ In this type of social system, the celibacy of the clergy is the ideological condition for its superiority. The cleric has to distance himself from the ties of fleshly kinship in order to gain the ability to engender spiritually, through speech and sacrament. Baptism is the embodiment of a system that establishes the superiority of spiritual over fleshly kinship, and therefore of the clergy over the laity. While biological parents stand aside, baptism brings about a dual spiritual filiation with regard to the godparents and the priest, as well as a dual divine filiation, with regard to the Church and God.⁹

Thirdly, kinship plays an equally structuring role within the divine sphere. The extremely delicate question of the Trinity resides entirely in the definition of the relationship between the Father and his Son. Orthodox doctrine of the Trinity places an original and perfectly paradoxical model of filiation right at the heart of Christian dogma.¹⁰ Mention should also be made of the equally paradoxical status of the Virgin, of whom Christ is the son, the father and the spouse all...



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