NOTES ON THE RELIGIOUS ICONOGRAPHY

BY MARGARET B. FREEMAN
Associate Curator of Medieval Art

It is impossible to interpret many of the scenes in the tapestry with any degree of certainty. There can be no doubt about the three Christian Heroes (because of their coats-of-arms) or Octavian and the Sybil (because they are inscribed). It seems probable that at least three scenes represent the story of Esther and Ahasuerus. These are at the left end of the tapestry (section 1 in the diagram). Above, Mordecai petitions the king to rescind the order for the death of the Jews, and Esther and Ahasuerus watch while the new decree is being written. Below, the two chamberlains who plotted against Ahasuerus are arrested in the presence of the king and queen. It may be that two other scenes on the right side of the tapestry (2) continue the story of Ahasuerus and Esther. On the left Esther intercedes with the king for the lives of her people while Hamon, in the background, pays his bribe into the king’s treasury, and on the right, Hamon plots against the Jews (Book of Esther).

A small scene above this (3) has usually been interpreted as Esther preparing for the feast. It is possible, however, that it represents one of the parables of the kingdom of heaven as does the scene of the man digging, on the opposite side of the tapestry (4). In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, chapter 13, the kingdom of heaven is likened unto “a treasure hid in a field, the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath and buyeth that field”; and he who is instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a man who is “an householder who bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.”

The large scene of a king enthroned with a queen before him (5) may also represent Esther and Ahasuerus with Hamon standing in the foreground. It could be intended as well for Solomon and the Queen of Sheba or King David with Bathsheba, or another famous royal pair.

It is certain that at least one scene tells the legend of Octavian (Augustus) and the Sybil (6). Here the emperor consults the Sybil, following Voragine’s account, “to demand of her if there were any so great as he on earth, or if any should come after him.” In the background the Sybil shows him a vision of the Christ Child saying, “This child is a greater lord than thou art; worship him.” (Voragine, The Golden Legend, “The Nativity.”)

Other scenes of an emperor, formerly identified as Charlemagne, more probably represent the emperor Augustus also (7 and 8). In the lower scene Augustus is enthroned with a woman who may be his sister Octavia. Over their heads the imperial eagle flies in with the dove of peace. Above (8), the emperor directs work on the Ara Coeli, which, it is said, he ordered constructed after seeing the vision of the Christ Child. This scene probably has a double significance, referring also to Tubalcaïn of the Old Testament, who was believed to have first “made sculptures and gravings in metal to the pleasure of the eyes . . . and had delight in the sound of his hammers” (Voragine, The Golden Legend, “History of Adam”). Tubalcaïn’s sister, Noëma, was said to have founded the craft of textile-making, and it is possible that she is here shown, in the scene at the left (9), with her ladies and several baskets of wool.

The small scene farther left (10) may represent the King of Moab sacrificing his eldest son in order to save his people, who were “perishing of hunger and thirst” in a siege (II Kings 3. 26-27).

The large central panel (11) shows a company of clergy (on the left) and laity (on the right) in adoration before the Deity. Mercy, with a lily, and Justice, with a sword, stand before him, and angels are at his side.

These diverse scenes assume a unity of theme when read in terms of such a book as the Speculum humanae salvationis (Mirror of Man’s Salvation), which explains the story of the redemption of man by means of a complicated system of prototypes and prefigurations. The tapestry has something of the scope of the Speculum itself. Here are
Adam and Eve, whose sin brought about man’s fall. Here is God’s paradise, which happily is open to all because God sent his Son as a man on earth to suffer and thereby redeem the world. The Incarnation and the Crucifixion of Christ, the Last Judgment and the joys of the blessed in paradise are shown in accordance with the symbolism of the Speculum.

In the Speculum, Esther praying Ahasuerus to have mercy on her people is the prototype of the Virgin Mary and her Son praying God to have pity on all his people at the Last Judgment. And as Ahasuerus offered Esther half of his kingdom, so Christ divided his kingdom into two parts, Justice and Mercy, of which he retained Justice for himself and offered the other, Mercy, to the Virgin Mary (Speculum, ch. 39). The feast of Ahasuerus is also a prototype for the joys of the blessed in paradise. “To this feast were invited not only the great and powerful, but all the people.” And “the feast of King Ahasuerus lasted one hundred and eighty days but that which God has prepared for us in paradise will last forever” (Speculum, ch. 43).

The “glory” of Solomon is also a prefiguration for the “eternal glory” of the blessed in heaven. As the Queen of Sheba, when she beheld the glory of King Solomon, said: “Thou exceedest the fame that I heard,” so will “the soul confess when it sees the glory of heaven . . . and the face of Our Lord” (Speculum, ch. 43). King Solomon was also the prototype for the young Christ Child, who was adored by the Three Kings from the East, because “even as an infant, Solomon was very wise,” and “all earthly kings . . ., the Queen of Sheba among the others, offered to him great gifts . . . such as had never been seen in Jerusalem before” (Speculum, ch. 9).

The purpose of the story of Augustus and the Sybil is not only to announce the Nativity of the Christ Child but to show that he came to save the pagans as well as the Jews (Speculum, ch. 8), and the Speculum includes among the joys of the blessed “riches and power greater than that of Augustus” and “good rule such that the good rule of Octavian would seem like prison and exile” (Speculum, ch. 43).

Tubalcain and Noema also figure in the joys of the blessed, for in paradise one will enjoy “the skill in art” of Noema and Tubalcain. Tubalcain working in metal is a prototype for the Crucifixion as well, since with “the blows of his mallet he made a melody . . . which can be compared to the melody of the prayer of Christ on the Cross asking forgiveness for his enemies.” The King of Moab offering his first-born son to save his people is also a prototype of the Crucifixion (Speculum, ch. 23).

Thus, if the hypothesis is correct, the tapestry tells in symbolic terms how, by God’s mercy and by the suffering of his Son, mankind may one day partake of the joys of paradise. If some of the symbolism seems unclear and many of the prototypes far-fetched and illogical to the modern mind, it does not necessarily mean that the hypothesis is incorrect; for it must be remembered that in the late Middle Ages, when our tapestry was designed and woven, many people enjoyed looking at their beliefs “through a glass darkly” rather than “face to face.”