

Gislebertus d'Autun and the Narrative of Scripture

Jamie Wheeler

Baylor University
Texas Gamma Chapter

Vol. 3(1), 2018

Article Title: Gislebertus d'Autun and the Narrative of Scripture

DOI: 10.21081/AX0149

ISSN: 2381-800X

Key Words: Gislebertus, Autun, St. Lazare, Romanesque sculpture, anagogical interpretation, Last Judgment

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Author contact information is available from the Editor at editor@alphachihonor.org.

Aletheia—The Alpha Chi Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship

- This publication is an online, peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary undergraduate journal, whose mission is to promote high quality research and scholarship among undergraduates by showcasing exemplary work.
- Submissions can be in any basic or applied field of study, including the physical and life sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, education, engineering, and the arts.
- Publication in *Aletheia* will recognize students who excel academically and foster mentor/mentee relationships between faculty and students.
- In keeping with the strong tradition of student involvement in all levels of Alpha Chi, the journal will also provide a forum for students to become actively involved in the writing, peer review, and publication process.
- More information and instructions for authors is available under the publications tab at www.AlphaChiHonor.org. Questions to the editor may be directed to editor@alphachihonor.org.

Alpha Chi is a national college honor society that admits students from all academic disciplines, with membership limited to the top 10 percent of an institution's juniors, seniors, and graduate students. Invitation to membership comes only through an institutional chapter. A college seeking a chapter must grant baccalaureate degrees and be regionally accredited. Some 300 chapters, located in almost every state, induct approximately 11,000 members annually. Alpha Chi members have been "making scholarship effective for good" since 1922.

Article Title: Gislebertus d’Autun and the Narrative of Scripture

DOI: 10.21081/AX0149

ISSN: 2381-800X

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

Gislebertus d’Autun and the Narrative of Scripture

Jamie Wheeler

Baylor University
Texas Gamma Chapter

Abstract

The cathedral of St. Lazare in Autun, France, is home to some of the best-known examples of Romanesque sculpture, the work of an artist known as Gislebertus. Though little is known about him, this sculptor seems to have created a unified artistic vision for the cathedral based on the anagogical reading of Scripture. He approaches the text through his cathedral as a whole which can only be understood in the light of the second coming of Christ. Although he depicts a variety of scriptural scenes, his treatment of them reveals an anagogical reading of Scripture as a single narrative, teleologically directed toward the Last Judgment—the subject of his greatest artistic achievement.

Key words: Gislebertus, Autun, St. Lazare, Romanesque sculpture, anagogical interpretation, Last Judgment

The great cathedral of St. Lazare in Autun is best known today, at least in the art-historical world, as home to the sculpture of Gislebertus d’Autun, one of the few sculptors of the medieval period whose name is known, as well as one of the greatest exponents of Romanesque sculpture. Since we know his name through his self-identifying inscription “Gislebertus hoc fecit,” he might well have been pleased at his posthumous fame.¹ However, far from being primarily self-glorifying, Gislebertus’s work prioritizes a complex and faithful engagement with scriptural texts in what is far more than just a visually pleasing adornment. The primarily narrative sculpture covers everything from the Garden of Eden (the famous Eve of the north doorway) to the Last Judgment (subject of the tympanum of the west portal), and even the seemingly random subjects of the columns

turn out to fit into the holistic understanding of Scripture that is at work in St. Lazare. Although Gislebertus d’Autun depicts a variety of scriptural scenes, his treatment of them reveals an anagogical reading of Scripture as a single narrative of salvation, teleologically directed toward the Last Judgment—the subject of his greatest artistic achievement.

The construction of St. Lazare, which took place throughout the twelfth century, was motivated by the growth of pilgrimage by lepers to the relics of St. Lazarus in Autun.² The popularity of the local church thus called for a particularly spectacular sculptural achievement that would welcome many visitors and communicate effectively a message of hope and healing. To receive such a major commission, Gislebertus must have been a recognized talent. It is possible that modern scholars have misinterpreted the inscription “Gislebertus me fecit” and we should instead be referring to an anonymous

¹ Denis Grivot and George Zarnecki, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun* (New York, NY: Orion/Trianon, 1961), 28.

² *Ibid.*, 17.

chief sculptor, as argued by Linda Seidel, who thinks that “Gislebertus” is actually the duke who founded the church; nevertheless, for brevity and in line with scholarly precedent I shall continue to refer to the main sculptor and guiding hand of the Autun sculpture project as Gislebertus.³ Whatever his personal identity, his artwork in St. Lazare is clearly a meaningful whole, which also exists in a specific cultural context—in this case Romanesque architecture. Meyer Schapiro explains that the eleventh century saw a resurgence of sculpture as an element in architecture, broadly motivated by a revival of religious activity channeled through several new religious orders.⁴

In addition to its architectural context, St. Lazare is centered in an intellectual context that was deeply engaged in reading Biblical stories as narrative but also as more than narrative. Schapiro argues that the rise in specifically monumental sculpture in exterior, non-liturgical spaces—such as the portals of St. Lazare—is sparked by parallel intellectual changes, especially the increase in preaching to lay audiences, a practice which grew in importance during this period.⁵ Manuals on preaching (*artes praedicandi*) in this era guided the preacher through a way of reading his scriptural text that was originally drawn from Augustine of Hippo and used four senses—the historical, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical.⁶ This gives background and context to the way Gislebertus’s work draws from the text of Scripture. Since the anagogical reading of Scripture focuses on what each passage reveals about the eschatological future of Christ’s second coming, this interpretation is especially important to a cathedral whose primary entrance is adorned by a massive sculpture of the Last Judgment.⁷

³ Linda Seidel, *Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Gislebertus, and the Cathedral of Autun* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 15.

⁴ Meyer Schapiro, *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 16-18.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 20, 29.

⁶ Beverley Mayne Kienzle, “*Ars Praedicandi*,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), n.p.

⁷ See E. Ann Matter, “Exegesis, Latin Christian Biblical,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), n.p., for a useful overview of the four senses of scripture.

However, it is important to note that the anagogical reading does not only apply to passages that are specifically eschatological in their subject matter; indeed, much of its importance in the history of biblical interpretation comes from its application to passages that do not depict the end times. In studying the text of the Bible, applying the anagogical reading allows an interpreter to show how any given text points forward into the eschatological conclusion of the story of redemption. The relationship among the sculptures at Autun guides the viewer toward the same type of interpretation for the stories they depict.

Scholars have investigated in some detail the way in which the Last Judgment tympanum, in particular, is grounded in the eschatological imagery of Revelation. Hearn notes that, while it is a “richly anecdotal” presentation of the Last Judgment with many realistic human details, it is also explicitly based on the Johannine vision in the book of Revelation, identifiable by the presence of angels blowing trumpets.⁸ He argues that its style was formed by the work at the abbey Cluny, where Gislebertus probably trained.⁹ Sauerländer, who sees Gislebertus’s work as a highly stylized development of previous Romanesque work, argues that it was deeply influenced by Byzantine art as filtered through Cluny, a claim that has been disputed but that, if nothing else, certainly indicates how salient this work is amidst the Romanesque flowering of sculptural art.¹⁰ To analyze all the details of the full sculptural program at Autun would be a book-length project, and indeed has been, in Grivot and Zarnecki’s seminal study *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun*. The work has also been much studied in Sauerländer’s important article, in Hearn’s *Romanesque Sculpture*, and in Yves Christe’s *Les Grands Portails Romains*. However, one aspect of this cathedral has not received as much attention: how the cathedral, viewed as a whole, responds to the narrative of scripture, likewise viewed as a whole. With the Last Judgment as the linchpin, the movement of the cathedral corresponds to the move-

⁸ M. F. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture: The Revival of Monumental Stone Sculpture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 180.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 190-191.

¹⁰ Willibald Sauerländer, “Gislebertus von Autun: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung seines künstlerischen Stils,” in *Studien zur Geschichte der Europäischen Plastik: Festschrift Theodor Müller zum 19. April 1965*, ed. Kurt Martin (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1965), 19-21. For an alternate view, see e.g. Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 191.



Figure 1. Gislebertus, *Eve*. This fragment, now in the Musée Rolin, Autun, France, is from the north portal of the St. Lazare cathedral, Autun, France. Photo by Wikimedia Commons user Cancre, published under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

ment of all of scripture from Genesis to Revelation. This article will examine some of the essential elements of the cathedral and then explore how they work together to guide the viewer toward an anagogical understanding of the whole Bible.

Gislebertus's iconic Eve, depicted in Figure 1, is the beginning of the story, at least within what remains of the cathedral (see Fig. 1). Her solemn yet seductive features illustrate the fall of man, but she also alludes to the second Adam, Christ, and his life through to his triumphant return as Judge of fallen man. Grivot and Zarnecki's reconstruction of the north doorway shows how Eve's recumbent figure would have fit into the lintel, facing Adam but glancing back over her shoulder at Satan and the apple.¹¹ This ambiguous combination of forward orientation and backward gaze is itself significant, reminding viewers that despite the past Fall of Man, there is hope in the future, as evidenced in God's promise in Genesis. Eve looks backward at her sin, but her body points forward to Adam, who can stand for the

Second Adam, the redeemer Christ. In Genesis, after the Fall, God warns the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman / and between your offspring and her offspring / he shall bruise your head / and you shall bruise his heel."¹²

This passage is usually understood to apply to Christ's defeat of Satan in his death, resurrection, and final victory at the end of days. Not only does Gislebertus's Eve directly depict the original woman whose "offspring" is Christ, but the work in its context also points more indirectly to anagogical interpretation by way of an allegorical reading—that is, interpretation based on New Testament parallels.¹³ Seidel argues that Eve's posture and flowing hair, coupled with her nearness to an image of the cathedral's patron saint, St. Lazarus, are intended to call to mind Lazarus' sister Mary Magdalene.¹⁴ Thus she would call attention to the adjoining image of Lazarus' resurrection by Christ, with the sculpture's

¹² Gen. 2:4-3:24 (ESV).

¹³ Matter, "Exegesis, Latin Christian Biblical," n.p.

¹⁴ Seidel, *Legends in Limestone*, 104.

¹¹ Grivot and Zarnecki, *Gislebertus*, Plate I(b).



Figure 2. Gislebertus, *Last Judgment*. This tympanum is found over the west door of the St. Lazare cathedral in Autun, France. Photo by Wikimedia Commons user Urban, released into the public domain.

forward movement, represented in Eve's form and posture, pointing further ahead through Adam to the Second Adam and through Lazarus to the general resurrection and the Last Judgment. This allegorical interpretation quickly expands into an anagogical reading as Lazarus' resurrection points not only to Christ's resurrection but also to the judgment and remaking of the world enabled by that resurrection.

The other masterwork of Autun, the Last Judgment tympanum, is the other end of the story, depicting in all its majesty the event at which the Eve sculpture gracefully hints (Figure 2). This complex work, which visitors to the cathedral would have seen as they passed through the main (west) entrance, emphasizes Christ's judicial role, revealing both redemption and damnation as possible ends to the story of any individual.¹⁵ Gislebertus combines the content of several Biblical passages to produce his complex, multilayered scene. If, as Willibald Sauerländer argues, the artist is drawing on Byzantine models to produce a type of scene hitherto unfamiliar in Western Christian art, this also signals his

deep engagement with ways of reading the text.¹⁶ Hearn deemphasizes the Byzantine influence, but grants that there may have been some; if so, he says, the use of such stylistic elements "was a matter of seeking the mode appropriate to the theme."¹⁷ Christe notes that the artist enlarges the image of Christ, compared to contemporary portals, to emphasize the theme of his glory, and creates a more complicated design for the rest of the portal to accomplish this specific artistic purpose; as Christe puts it, "Le sculpteur d'Autun n'accepte pas la solution facile des registres superposés" ("The sculptor of Autun does not accept the easy solution of superposed registers," although this arrangement was familiar from other portals).¹⁸ Gislebertus is not merely producing a trite and familiar visual response to the Biblical eschatological narratives, as if copying a standard scene without

¹⁶ Sauerländer, "Gislebertus von Autun," 19-21; cf. also Don Denny, "The Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun: Its Sources and Meaning," *Speculum* 57, no. 3 (1982), 536.

¹⁷ Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 191.

¹⁸ Yves Christe, *Les grands portails romans: Etudes sur l'iconologie des théophanies romanes* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969), 126-127.

¹⁵ Grivot and Zamecki, *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun*, Plate A.

thinking about it; rather, he is drawing on a wide range of artistic resources as well as the details of the written text to find the most appropriate way of depicting this scene in sculpture.¹⁹ The artist is not merely mechanically illustrating but reading and responding to the text of Scripture.²⁰ While Gislebertus is in a sense reading eschatological passages from Daniel and Ezekiel to Revelation, certain briefer selections are the most important sources for his imagery—especially, as Hearn notes, certain parts of Revelation.²¹ The layout of the scene comes from a particular passage that, while it does describe a final judgment, is not in a prophetic book like Revelation, but in one of the gospels: Matthew 25:31–46.

Of course it is easy to apply an anagogical reading to texts of this sort; indeed, the eschatological subject matter itself demands such a reading. However, Gislebertus goes deeper than merely acknowledging that this text depicts the end of days. The very shape of the tympanum, with the figure of Christ at the center dividing the space into two, emphasizes the division of the justified from the damned, or as the Matthew passage expresses it, the sheep from the goats. Appropriately, the saved are on Christ's right and the damned on his left: "He will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left."²² Gislebertus is clearly reading this passage, to which he brings pictorial imagination to expound it with almost pastoral vividness. While the text describes the past behavior of the righteous "sheep" who cared for the poor and needy and the unrighteous "goats" who did not, Gislebertus's focus on the eschatological outcome of events combined with his medium's demand for the freezing of a single moment in stone leads to a powerful depiction of the different experiences of the saved and the damned at the moment of judgment itself.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ Like all medieval art, this cathedral took shape within a community. Even if Gislebertus himself, as is likely, was not literate or theologically trained, he would have heard homilies on these subjects and seen prior works of art depicting them. He likely also received theological guidance from the bishop and other cathedral authorities. To whatever extent they were collaborative in this sense, the sculptures remain part of a unified vision and can be read as a coherent response to the scriptural text. It is convenient to refer to the artist of these sculptures as "Gislebertus," even while acknowledging that the artist certainly did not work in creative or intellectual isolation.

²¹ Hearn, *Romanesque Sculpture*, 180.

²² Matt.25:33 (ESV)

In the textual structure of Matthew 25, there is a great deal of parallelism between the saved and the damned; the same is true in the visual structure of Gislebertus's Last Judgment. On Christ's right (the viewer's left) are saints and angels guiding the saved souls into the gates of heaven; on Christ's left, as if the saved are reflected in a dark mirror, are devils driving the damned into the gates of hell. However, Gislebertus breaks this parallelism to make a crucial theological point: where the heavenly side shows a dignified St. Peter holding the keys of heaven, the hellish side in the corresponding place does not show some kind of gatekeeper devil. Instead, it shows the moment of judgment, symbolized by St. Michael weighing souls in a pair of balances. There are devils in this part of the image, but they do not have the dominance and authority of their visual counterpart St. Peter; they are contorted in futile attempts to throw off the justice of St. Michael's balances. Heaven and hell are not equal, not merely mirror images of each other as in Manichaean dualism. Heaven has authority even in hell, and God's messenger of just judgment visually dominates the hellish side of the image. Hell is not the devils' domain, but their place of punishment alongside the damned souls. This point is evident in the textual structure of Matthew 25, where the Son of Man is the authoritative speaker throughout, and though Gislebertus uses different techniques in a different medium, he succeeds in creating an accurate visual reading of this text's details.

Other details are less directly drawn from the Matthew 25 text that structures the tympanum as a whole. They tend to reflect the spirit, if not the exact imagery, of passages from Revelation that describe the experience of judgment, the blessedness of the saved, and the suffering of the damned. Revelation 20, for instance, describes the damned being "thrown into the lake of fire" (ESV), and the tympanum depicts no lake of fire—it is too full of human figures, because Gislebertus is interested in human souls more than in the most dramatic imagery. However, he does include the violent, definitive action of throwing: it occurs in the detail that Grivot and Zarnecki call "the stranglehold of hell," although it illustrates not the power of hell but the justice of heaven.²³ In the middle of the procession of the damned on the right-hand side of the lintel, a pair of hands reach down to grasp a man by his neck. He screams, but the hands that grasp him have no ears to hear him. Judgment is just as

²³ Grivot and Zarnecki, *Gislebertus*, 31.

final in Gislebertus's detail of divine hands as it is in St. John's mention of hellfire. Though the different medium leads the artist to use different symbols, he retains the spirit and significance of the Biblical details as well as much of the described spatial arrangement of the scene.

What then of St. Lazare's third major sculptural work—the set of column capitals? Not all of these are necessarily by Gislebertus (once again, assuming his historical existence), but they do fit together in the decorative scheme of the cathedral; eclectic though their subject-matter is, they are stylistically consistent in their inconsistency. Unlike traditional Greco-Roman column capitals, those of St. Lazare are almost all narrative, once again harkening to the importance of reading the sculpture alongside the text it derives from. While many of the capitals are not directly scriptural in basis, Grivot and Zarnecki argue that even the fables, often used by medieval artists for humorous effect, are important to Gislebertus for their moral significance; thus they fit in well with the attentiveness to symbolism and detail evident throughout the cathedral.²⁴ Most important for the artist's reading of scripture, of course, are the capitals based directly on scriptural sources. Placing Old Testament subjects next to New Testament ones is typical of Gislebertus's attitude to chronology: the second and third capitals of the west doorways, "Abraham Dismissing Hagar and Ishmael" and "Six Elders of the Apocalypse," skip quite literally from Genesis to Revelation. This does not, however, mean that Gislebertus threw his capitals in haphazardly. Instead, he can do this because he sees Genesis and Revelation, and everything in between, as related in one vast narrative. The contrast between Hagar and Sarah—illustrated visually in the capital, in which Sarah stands on one side of Abraham and Hagar on the other—is traditionally interpreted as the contrast between Law and Gospel.²⁵ In its context, it echoes the contrast between the damned and the saved in the tympanum under which the viewer has just passed. It invites the entering congregation to identify themselves as Sarah's children, recipients of grace, related to the figures on the tympanum. Christ in majesty has saved them, St. Michael with his balances finds them righteous, and key-wielding St. Peter lets them in the

door.²⁶ The sculptures also challenge the congregation to examine their spiritual status—to ask whether these visual statements really do apply to them. Examining the details of each column capital, not to mention all the other interior sculptures, would require a book in itself, but the Abraham and Hagar capital exemplifies how Gislebertus approaches these incidental yet important scenes.

Reading even one individual work of Gislebertus alongside its scriptural source is illuminating, but still more illuminating is looking at the cathedral as a whole, considered as analogous to the whole of Scripture. Gislebertus begins at the end: visitors to St. Lazare would typically enter through the west doorway, so the first work they would see is the Last Judgment tympanum. After that they would pass the series of narrative capitals, each a vignette retelling a scrap of text—Biblical or otherwise—but not arranged in chronological sequence. It is harder to predict when they might see the north doorway with Eve, but whatever their experience it would certainly not be in chronological order. Gislebertus approaches the Bible much as a medieval preacher, working from a lectionary, would approach it; though the text is encountered in seemingly isolated chunks, he still sees it as a whole because all of the chunks are brought together and made meaningful in the context of Christ's imminent and final victory and judgment. The anagogical reading of each text relates it to Gislebertus's definitive text, the subject of his crowning achievement: the spectacular Last Judgment tympanum.

²⁶ Christe, *Les grands portails romans*, 11: "A la porte de l'église, l'image de la Jérusalem céleste... les fidèles sont aussitôt mis en présence de Dieu" ("At the door of the church, the image of the heavenly Jerusalem... the faithful are immediately put in the presence of God").

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Bibliography

- Christe, Yves. *Les Grands Portails Romains: Etudes sur l'icologie des Théophanies Romanes*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1969.
- Denny, Don. "The Last Judgment Tympanum at Autun: Its Sources and Meaning." *Speculum* 57, no. 3 (1982): 532-547.
- Grivot, Denis, and George Zarnecki. *Gislebertus: Sculptor of Autun*. New York, NY: Orion/Trianon, 1961.
- Hearn, M. F. *Romanesque Sculpture: The Revival of Monumental Stone Sculpture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981.
- Kienzle, Beverley Mayne. "Ars Praedicandi." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, edited by Robert E. Bjork. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624.
- Matter, E. Ann. "Exegesis, Latin Christian Biblical." *The Oxford Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, edited by Robert E. Bjork. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198662624.001.0001/acref-9780198662624>.
- Sauerländer, Willibald. "Gislebertus von Autun: Ein Beitrag zur Entstehung seines künstlerischen Stils." In *Studien zur Geschichte der Europäischen Plastik: Festschrift Theodor Müller zum 19. April 1965*, edited by Kurt Martin. Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 1965.
- Schapiro, Meyer. *Romanesque Architectural Sculpture: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Seidel, Linda. *Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Gislebertus, and the Cathedral of Autun*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.