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Imagining Christian kingship in Sigismund II Augustus's "Genesis" tapestries at Wawel Castle (1553)

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Chapter Five: The Hermeneutics of *Genesis*

This chapter proposes a triadic reading of the *Genesis* tapestries' narrative in terms of its didactic aims, all of which are separate but may work simultaneously on the viewer:

1. The tapestries present avatars for the king in the form of the protagonists, the patriarchs. Crucially, there is no documented example of Sigismund adopting any of the *Genesis* protagonists as a recurring avatar in his overall image-creation programme. Rather, Sigismund can be considered a "floating" presence throughout the series, inhabiting the bodies of the patriarchs to draw on some of their qualities or life episodes, without the burden of adhering to their entire characters or biographies. This is particularly important as the protagonists of *Genesis* are all complex figures with varying degrees of sinfulness, while still functioning as exemplars of virtue and heroism. On the other hand, relying on flawed characters as avatars may have allowed Sigismund to tap into more nuanced ideas of magnificence, perhaps referencing the potential of even the greatest men for moments of human frailty, along with the ever-present promise of redemption and renewal, or by presenting the antitheses of princely virtues.
2. They convey exhortative moral messages for the viewer, which can be extrapolated to moral messages for Sigismund's subjects as a whole.
3. They function as vehicles for Sigismund's religious and political policy through metaphorical episodes.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Orzechowski's *ekphrasis* does shed light on the image of the king and the morals of the tapestries, and will continue to be a valuable source for the readings of the narratives and characters. However, it does not tell us as much about more explicitly political and theological undertones contained therein. Indeed, while early

modern *ekphrases* such as Orzechowski's commonly referenced the morality and politics of the subject, there is little basis for this in the classical rhetorical tradition, save the moral messages of the *Tabula*. Therefore, we must expand our textual foundation beyond the generic confines of *ekphrasis* to bring in early modern sources on politics and religion in particular.

In order to construct the triadic reading, we may rely on texts that would have been commonplace in the sixteenth century Polish and European intellectual canons, both for Sigismund and his learned courtiers. To deconstruct political allusions in the tapestries (either intentional on Sigismund's part or potentially evident to the viewer), we must consider some treatises specific to the Polish context, most importantly the works of the prolific Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, Sigismund's secretary. The theological texts were in heavy circulation throughout the Republic of Letters, making it plausible that the tapestries' artists and foreign viewers as well as Polish audiences operated within a similar exegetical lexicon. These include the works of the Church Fathers such as Augustine and Jerome, and the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas. We must also remember the Latin inscriptions of the tapestries, which paraphrase and cite verses from the Vulgate.

Given the popularity of reformed theology among the Polish nobility at the time, and Sigismund's own familiarity with Calvin's writings, it is also valuable to bring in the systematic exegesis of the *Institutes of the Christian Faith* (1536). Calvin provides us with a particularly relevant framework for examining biblical/Christian kingship, which will emerge from the following readings of *Genesis*, but which can be summarised as follows: that Scripture contains all the guiding principles of a holy life (or, in this case, holy rule), that an almighty God holds sway over all, human frailty is succoured by divine grace, and that biblical covenants between God and his chosen people are the guiding lights for salvation. This macro-level understanding of the Old Testament is useful for uncovering a

logic running through the tapestries about kingship and faith. It also leads us to one of the other prominent themes of the series: that of lineage, genealogy, and dynasty.

Not only does this body of sources provide us with an interdisciplinary reading of *Genesis*, but it also frees us from relying on Orzechowski's account too heavily, if one should so choose. I have argued that the *ekphrasis* is an enormously valuable source for understanding *Genesis,* and continue to do so in this chapter. However, if one treats Orzechowski's text with some scepticism for reasons outlined in Chapter Three, one would still arrive at a very similar reading (especially in terms of morals) by relying on the other sources presented here. Naturally, this is because Orzechowski would have been familiar with these texts due to his humanist education, and drew on his knowledge of them in describing the messages of *Genesis*. In this way, reading *Genesis* need not hinge on accepting Orzechowski's interpretations at face value. Additionally, we must remember that we can check the veracity of Orzechowski's descriptions against the actual textiles, which shows that, despite some of his "errors" in portraying the series chronology, his descriptions of the characters and scenes are very accurate to the images themselves.

Finally, it is necessary to reiterate that Sigismund's use of the patriarchs for his image-creation and messages was by no means unusual. As mentioned in Chapter Two, many of his contemporaries employed Old Testament figures in tapestry and other artwork for similar means and with similar messages in mind, such as princely virtue, strong hierarchical leadership, and dynasty. Accordingly, the literature of the time reflected a trans-European understanding of the political and theological relevance of these characters in an early modern context. For example, John G. Geerken has researched the use of Moses in Italian Renaissance political texts, while Don Cameron Allen has traced the characterisation of Noah and both symbolic and literal references to the Flood in art and

writing.[434] Therefore, in our analysis, we must remember that, aside from some potential references to Polish politics, the proposed messages about rule and government would not only have been legible to a local audience in Kraków, but to a viewer from anywhere in Europe. By using these Old Testament figures, Sigismund was emulating his peers and engaging in a continental dialogue about the nature of Christian kingship.

5.1. Adam

Adam is not only the first of the characters in the biblical order, but was also granted a particularly privileged place in relation to the king upon the unveiling of the tapestries. *Paradise Bliss* hung over Sigismund's bed, placing Adam in literal proximity to the king. *Adam Cultivates the Earth* hung next to it. Moreover, as one of the largest and grandest tapestries in the set, arguably one of the two centrepieces (along with *The Flood*), *Paradise Bliss* places Adam in an exalted position within the overall narrative. Even Orzechowski spends almost thrice as much time on *Paradise Bliss* than any other tapestry in the *ekphrasis*.

Fig. 45 The creation of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Bliss*.

[434] John J. Geerken, "Machiavelli's Moses and Renaissance Politics," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 60, no. 4 (1999): 579-595; Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963).

In many ways, Adam is a natural fit for a princely exemplar: a father, husband, and religious leader, the original natural historian, blessed with wisdom from God Himself and granted authority over all of His creation (see Fig. 43 and 44).[435] As the progenitor of all mankind and cultivator of the earth after the Fall, he (like the king) is the first among men, associated with paternal leadership and protection over the land. Additionally, during the Renaissance, Neoplatonists became fixated with the search for the "lost language of Adam," a perfect prelapsarian knowledge of the world conveyed to Adam directly from God before the Fall, and that might be recovered through grace and rigorous study. As stated by Alberti in *De architectura* and echoed by his Neoplatonic contemporaries, the Adamic language was hieroglyphic, based on natural symbolism written into creation in the Garden of Eden.[436] Thus, Adam can be associated not only with fatherhood and leadership but also with the highest form of divine wisdom, to which he was given unique access.

Fig. 46 Adam receives the commandment not to eat the Fruit in *Paradise Bliss*.

[435] Piwocka, "Art of majesty," 402. The recurrence of Minerva on the border of all of the *Genesis* tapestries also highlights the focus on wisdom as a chief princely virtue.
[436] See Ludwig Volkmann, "The Hieroglyphics of the Italian Humanists," in *Hieroglyph, Emblem, and Renaissance Pictography* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 8-83; Sonja Drimmer, "The Hieroglyphs of Kingship: Italy's Egypt in Early Tudor England and the Manuscript as Monument," *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, no. 59/60 (2014/2015): 255-283.

While we do not have a surviving example of Sigismund being compared to Adam directly, these are precisely the kind of princely virtues that Renaissance humanists presented as models in the *specula principum,* and which Polish humanists echoed as models for Sigismund specifically. For example, in his dedication of *Lascius sive de poena homicidii oratio prima* (1543) to Sigismund, Modrzewski refers to him as the "father of the fatherland," whose highest calling is to protect peace, the greatest virtue of a kingdom.[437] In the dedication of *Querela de contemptione legis divinae in homicidas* (1546), he calls for Sigismund to appeal to a "tribunal of reason" to solve disputes in his territory.[438] Similarly, in the dedication to the fourth book ("On the Church") of *De Republica emendanda* (1551), he argues that religious conflict should be quelled through discussion and intellectual argumentation, with the king as mediator.[439]

On the other hand, Adam is far from an uncomplicated character, as he is the perpetrator of the Fall of Man and the introduction of original sin to the human race. Although *Paradise Bliss* also depicts the creation of Adam and Eve and their life in Eden before the Fall, the inscription mentions only the narrative from the command which precipitated the Fall: "God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Life. They, disobedient, were exiled from Paradise."[440] Similarly, it is Adam's sin and not his virtues that Orzechowski mentions in the *ekphrasis*. While only a third of the actual tapestry depicts the sin and fall of Adam and Eve, Orzechowski spends around two-thirds

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[437] Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, *"Ad Sigismundum Secundum Augustum Regem Poloniae in lascium sive orationem de poena homicidii primam praefatio,"* in *Fricii Modrevii Opera Omnia,* vol. 2 (1543, reis., Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1954), 17.

[438] Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, "*Ad Sigismundum Secundum Augustum Regem Poloniae in eandem querelam de contemptione legis divinae in homicidas altera praefatio*," in *Opera Omnia* (1546, reis.), 121.

[439] Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, *De Republica emendanda*, trans. Edwin Jędrkiewicz (1551, reiss., Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1953), 363-364.

[440] It should be noted that this is not an accurate account of the biblical story, as God commanded Adam and Eve not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, not the Tree of Life.

of his ekphrastic description of *Paradise Bliss* on this final third. His description of the exile from Eden (see Fig. 32) is particularly vivid:

> On the third our exile, miserable and disastrous, was shown. Here, you would recoil in terror at the sight of Adam's flight, Eve's trembling, and God the wrathful judge, so that, looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well. Such did the tapestry depict the sin of Adam and the wrath of God in all its shades and details.[441]

Orzechowski does not elaborate on the nature of "the sin of Adam," although he names Eve's as "gluttony," in a metaphorical sense, as gluttony for the divine knowledge and immortality that the forbidden fruit would grant.[442] However, the sin of Adam is explored in detail by Calvin in the *Institutes*, a text which, as mentioned previously, Sigismund read. One element that particularly stands out in relation to kingship is the sin of pride, as Adam succumbs to the serpent's temptation, "Ye shall be as gods" (Gen 3:5). In this sense, Adam is a cautionary tale against an earthly ruler, granted power by God, who might abuse that power for his own benefit and greed. Interestingly, however, Calvin also notes that Adam committed the sin of "despising the truth" of God's word and losing his faith and trust in his creator. Hence, "infidelity was at the root of the revolt," from which sprang pride and ingratitude.[443] Considering the greatest sin to be the loss of faith introduces a theme that will continue throughout the next three subsets of the tapestries.

In general, the presentation of Adam in *Paradise Bliss* as a complex figure, one who is inescapably associated with the sin that precipitated the fall of mankind, has certain implications for Sigismund's association with the patriarch. We should not read any of the *Genesis* protagonists as full avatars for Sigismund in the way that Henry VIII adopted the

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[441] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.
[442] Ibid.
[443] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1536, reis., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 213, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/c/calvin/institutes/cache/institutes.pdf.

image of Abraham. This allows some leeway in connecting the qualities of Adam, positive and negative, with Sigismund. It is possible, for example, to read Adam's virtues and dynastic connotations in terms of Sigismund's princely virtue, while applying his sin and associated moral warnings to Sigismund's intended viewer. On the other hand, if we adopt Orzechowski's reading and the inscription, we find that the sin of Adam can and must be tied back to the patron as well. Most blatantly, Orzechowski's description of the exile in *Paradise Bliss* foreshadows the final lines of his *ekphrasis*. The statement "looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well," can be applied not only to the viewer but to Sigismund as well, who "placed himself beneath the eyes of a wrathful God, so that, whether waking or sleeping, by night or by day, he…would contemplate the King of Kings above them, in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin."[444] In short, therefore, it is possible to read Adam as a moral warning for princes: the patron is mindful of the mistakes of Adam in falling into sin and trying to approximate "the King of Kings above [him]."

Fig. 47 Adam's penance in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

[444] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53, 55.

The consequences of original sin, both for Adam and Eve and for the rest of humanity, are depicted in the following tapestry, *Adam Cultivates the Earth* (Fig. 45). Orzechowski describes the tapestry as a depiction of "our toil and pain." In contrast to his lush description of *Paradise Bliss*, here he focuses on the poverty of "miserable Adam" and "reckless Eve's" clothing and new surroundings, and mentions the wild birds in the background "raising their voices at Eve, recalling her sin and mocking her exile."[445] According to Augustine, the pelts that Adam and Eve wore after their exile, as depicted in this tapestry, symbolise the shame and weakness of the soul after sin, which can only be removed through reunion with Christ.[446]

Orzechowski's twofold mention of Adam's "exile from his homeland" and cultivation of "foreign land" is also noteworthy. This frames Adam as a leader who has been stripped of a kind of national or ethnic identity through his banishment. Here, again, we may find a moral warning for princes. Earthly rulers who do not abide by the divinely-ordained model of virtue may find themselves dispossessed of their power and, consequently, of their identity as fathers of their homeland, as figureheads of a kingdom. These implications might be particularly potent in a limited, elective monarchy such as Poland-Lithuania, with a legally-enshrined history of a right of resistance.

Still, Adam's story after Genesis 3, the basis for *Adam Cultivates the Earth*, establishes his penitence for disobeying God. This culminates in Genesis 5, "The Book of the Generations of Adam," which delineates his progeny through his son Seth to Noah. Thus, Adam is rehabilitated as a reformed sinner who, despite the Fall, reclaimed his

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[445] Ibid., 53.

[446] "...to the end that they might go on no further in self-confidence, but rather should become weak, seeing before their feet the Divinity weak by taking our coats of skins [Gen 3:21], and wearied, might cast themselves down upon It, and It rising, might lift them up." Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Edward B. Pusey (c. 397, reis., Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 92, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_Confessionum_Libri_Tredecim-Pusey_Transaltion,_EN.pdf (accessed 24 June 2024).

paternal leadership over the Earth. Here, we see the introduction of the motif of husbandry into the *Genesis* series as a metaphor for the spiritual cultivation of the soul and of the earth.[447] From Sigismund's perspective, there is a natural extension of this metaphor to kingship: like Adam, a king must have husbandry over his own soul and over his kingdom.[448]

Adam's "rehabilitation" also produced an illustrious lineage through the descendants of his son, Seth. Indeed, the entire *Genesis* series can be read as a celebration of dynastic accomplishments, as each of the protagonists is the ancestor of the next in the series (Adam, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses). As Alexandra Walsham argues, sixteenth-century audiences were well-accustomed to a reading of the Book of Genesis as a genealogical chronicle of Adam and his posterity, which was an extended metaphor for the spiritual family of the faithful in the Church, the "chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people" (1 Pet 2:9). As inheritors of the divine covenants made with the patriarchs and fulfilled through Christ, the lineage of believers all shared in the grace, blessings, and protection granted to the "family" of the Church, and the promise of inheritance of the kingdom of heaven.[449] For example, in the *Institutes*, Calvin centres his commentary on Adam on genealogy as a means of arguing for an uninterrupted lineage of believers since the beginning of time to the present moment.[450]

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[447] This is the metaphor used by Philo of Alexandria in his commentary on Genesis. A farmer such as Adam had the responsibility of planting seeds, pruning branches, nursing sick plants, and separating the productive plants from the weeds. Accordingly, humans should be "farmers" for their own souls and over the earth, so that it might approximate heaven. Philo of Alexandria, *The Works of Philo Judaeus*, Book 7, trans. Charles Duke Jonge (London: H.G. Bohn, 1854-1890), http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book7.html (accessed 29 January 2024).

[448] In fact, in his commentary on Noah the Vintner, Philo revisits this metaphor and directly links it to the work of a king over his kingdom. Philo of Alexandria, *Works*, Book 11, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book11.html (accessed 29 January 2024).

[449] Alexandra Walsham, *Generations: Age, Ancestry, and Memory in the English Reformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 42.

[450] Calvin, *Institutes*, 71, 215, 217, 388, 404, 405.

The narrative of Genesis is, Walsham observes, "enveloped in an enumeration of the offspring of Adam and the patriarchs." It shows the birth of humanity from a single root (a prefiguration of the Tree of Jesse, Christ's genealogy, in Isaiah 11:1). Beginning with the exhortation to Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply," it shows the origins of the Christian faith as "a function of reproduction and succession of blood." In its several genealogical tangents listing the offspring of the patriarchs, it becomes "a recital of 'begats,'" a text that "forges an intimate link between demography and theology, between generational change and the transmission of grace" (see Fig. 46).[451]

Fig. 48 Young Cain (L) and Abel (R), the start of Adam's lineage, in *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

For Sigismund, this interpretation of Adam's story may have been particularly pertinent, considering his anxieties about continuing his dying dynasty. It is reasonable to assume that he and his learned courtiers would have been familiar with the genealogical reading of Genesis. Specifically, the decision to break from established models of tapestry commissioning for an episodic, multigenerational narrative (rather than a focus on one of the protagonists) makes a reading of *Genesis* as a dynastic chronicle more plausible. This

[451] Walsham, *Generations*, 173.

theme of lineage and paternity extends beyond the Adam and Eve subset into the rest of the series, while taking on somewhat different dimensions and complexities.

5.2. Cain and Abel

Unlike Adam, the precedent for using Adam's sons Cain and Abel in court art is more nebulous. Apart from their appearance among the figures in *Infamia* (part of Charles V's *Los Honores* set), there are no other known Cain and Abel tapestries in the first half of the sixteenth century. Although the story did feature in paintings by Bachiacca (1520), Titian (1542-1544), and Frans Floris (mid-1550s), none of these were known to have been commissioned by royal patrons. Sigismund's decision to order four Cain and Abel tapestries is, therefore, fairly novel.

While there is no obvious candidate for an exemplar in the Cain and Abel story, the morals of the narrative are quite easily applicable to princely virtue. In its essence, it is a parable against violence, particularly unrighteous violence fueled by wrath and hatred: as Orzechowski describes, the act of a "godless brother" and "fierce tyrant," whose actions are "dictated by anger."[452] The inscription of *Cain Kills Abel* states that Cain commits murder "prompted by wrath," indicating that this is the ultimate sin of Cain. Orzechowski notes that Wrath is personified in the tapestry "behind Cain's back in the form of a woman" (Fig. 47). Moreover, based on the inscription of *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, Orzechowski identifies the two female figures chasing Cain as personifications of the sins "Despair" and "Vengeance" (Fig. 48).[453] In the context of the outbreak of religious wars across the continent and internal threats of civil war, this message would have been very relevant to Sigismund's early reign, especially considering his tendency toward nonviolence,

[452] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53.
[453] Ibid.

appeasement, and toleration. In *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, the tapestry directly following the Cain and Abel sequence, we see the consequences of Cain's fall: his progeny, holders of the "mark of Cain," descend into bloody discord and war.

Fig. 49 Cain and "Wrath" in *Abel's Sacrifice*.

Fig. 50 "Despair" and "Vengeance" in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*.

In fact, based on the portrayal of the story in the tapestries, Cain can be read as twice-damned: once by his sin of murder, and again by his cowardice in fleeing God's punishment. Orzechowski focuses on Cain's cowardice in his description of *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, summarising that "the end for godless brethren is always sad."[454] There may, therefore, be a nod in the tapestry's story toward the need for proper penitence and atonement, which would form a narrative rhyme with the moral of *Adam Cultivates the Earth*.

In Book Two ("On the Law") of *De Republica*, Modrzewski sees another allegory in the Cain story for just punishment of murder. In his chapter on laws against injuries, he bemoans the nobles who routinely pay their way out of responsibility for their crimes,

[454] Ibid.

including murdering their serfs. Modrzewski believes that every life taken should be avenged in order to deter future offenders and protect the sanctity of life. Here, he invokes Cain, whom God protected after his exile by promising that "whosoever shall kill Cain shall be punished sevenfold" (Gen 4:15). Thus, Modrzewski argues that God intended every murder to be repaid: not just the murder of an innocent man, but even that of the first murderer himself.[455] While Orzechowski and Modrzewski draw on different elements of the story to reach their conclusions, they converge in understanding Cain and Abel as a metaphor for God's vision of justice and criminal punishment in a kingdom.

Interestingly, though, the inscription does not only centre the parable on its most common moral lesson regarding anger and vengeance. Returning to the female figures in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*, it is striking that one of them is "Despair." Here, the inscription draws on Cain's lament in Genesis 4:13-14:

> My iniquity is greater than that I may deserve pardon. Behold thou dost cast me out this day from the face of the earth, and I shall be hidden from thy face, and I shall be a vagabond and a fugitive on the earth: every one, therefore, that findeth me, shall kill me.

However, God counters Cain's despair at the impossibility of forgiveness and atonement for his crime: "No, it shall not be so: but whosoever shall kill Cain, shall be punished sevenfold" (Gen 4:15). This covenant is formalised in the mark of Cain: both a sign of his sin and exile, and a warden of protection for any who might try to harm him. Thus, the presence of "Despair" (here, a loss of faith in God's forgiveness) alongside "Vengeance" in the tapestry elevates it to another, perhaps equally grave sin that should be combated by faith and trust in God. We find hints toward this interpretation in the *ekphrasis*, as Orzechowski describes Cain as "godless" or "impious" (*impius*) in the descriptions of all

[455] Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 255.

three tapestries in this subset. This interpretation is also supported by mediaeval and early modern discourse on the seven deadly sins. While despair is not explicitly listed among them, it can be linked to *acedia* or sloth. While *acedia* could connote laziness, apathy, or ennui, it could also describe, as in Aquinas's *Summa*, "sorrow about spiritual good," or a cessation of spiritual growth and progress toward eternal life.[456] Thus, according to Gregory the Great, "from sloth there arise malice, rancour, cowardice, despair."[457] The fall of Cain, therefore, is a parable against not one but two deadly sins (See Fig. 49).

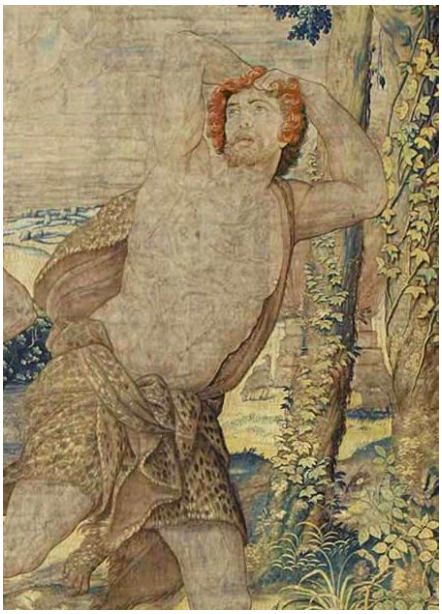

Fig. 51 Cain's despair in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God*.

The tragedy of Cain can also be read as a cautionary tale against succumbing to unfettered passions. In Genesis 4:7, God warns Cain: "If thou do well, shalt thou not receive? But if ill, shall not sin forthwith be present at the door? But the lust thereof shall be under thee, and thou shalt have dominion over it" (Gen 4:7). Orzechowski's descriptions support this interpretation. As mentioned previously, he highlights Cain's impiety and

[456] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1274, reis.), q. 35, a. 2, https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/1225-1274,_Thomas_Aquinas,_Summa_Theologiae_%5B1%5D,_EN.pdf (accessed 29 January 2024).
[457] Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob,* trans. John Henry Parker (c. 580, reis., London: Rivington, 1844), 31.45.87-88.

passions, especially in his description of the murder itself: “the taut neck, the crazed eyes, the tormented face, the bristled hair, and finally the blow itself, dictated by anger.” In contrast, Abel is described as “righteous,” while his death is presented as a martyrdom, as he is “ready for the strike and prepared for death” (see Fig. 50).[458]

The dichotomy between Cain and Abel was well-established in theological literature by the time of the unveiling of *Genesis*. Most notably, in *City of God*, St. Augustine sees Cain and Abel as the founders of the “City of Men” and the “City of God" respectively. Their conflict “illustrated the hatred that subsists between the two cities…and in each individual ‘the flesh lusteth against the spirit, and the spirit against the flesh.’”[459] Cain’s City of Men “worships God or gods who may aid it in reigning victoriously and peacefully on earth not through love of doing good, but through lust of rule.”[460] In the context of princely virtue, then, the story instructs a ruler to “have dominion” over the moral health of his kingdom as well as his own lust for power and earthly pleasures, so that his entire nation might emulate the City of God.

Fig. 52 Impious Cain versus pious Abel in *Cain Kills Abel*.

[458] Orzechowski, “Panegyricus,” in *Arrasy*, 53.
[459] Augustine of Hippo, *City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (5th c. AD, reis., Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2015), 392
[460] Ibid., 394.

Here, we return to the theme of paternity and genealogy from the Adam subset. Cain and Abel can be understood as an admonition against familial discord: Adam failed as a leader of his household to ensure that his sons were both virtuous, and Cain failed to live in harmony with his brother. This may be read literally in terms of intrafamilial strife, but it may also function as a metaphor for concord in a kingdom. In terms of kingship, then, there is perhaps a twofold message: for the king to maintain order and peace in his own family as the patriarch of a dynasty, and in his kingdom as the "father" of his people, and for his subjects to accept his leadership and not rebel. This links back to the interpretation of the Book of Genesis as a saga of lineage and family, as well as to the Aristotelian notion so common in the early modern period of the patriarchal family as the building block of society.[461]

Finally, the issue of Cain's offering may provide another hint at the didactic content of these tapestries. As Orzechowski describes, in *Abel's Sacrifice,* "Abel's pleasing offering to God is shown and, conversely, the unpleasing offering of Cain, the cause of the godless brother's wrath."[462] It is not clear from Genesis (or the tapestry) why Cain's offering was displeasing to God, but it may be deduced that Abel offered, as the biblical text states, "the firstlings of his flock," a more valuable and selfless sacrifice than Cain's "fruits of the earth."[463] The tapestry inscription also states that "by his faith Abel made a better offering to God than Cain," suggesting that it was Abel's piety that led him to make a more pleasing offering. This is underlined by the second citation in the inscription, Hebrews 11:1-4, especially the final verse: "By faith Abel offered to God a sacrifice

[461] Walsham, *Generations,* 13.
[462] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy,* 53.
[463] Gen 4:3-4. Procopius of Gaza, Josephus, and Augustine also theorise that Abel's offering was pleasing because he was virtuous and gave all that he had, whereas Cain was selfish and divided his bounty between God and himself. Abel is a lover of God, whereas Cain is a lover of himself (*philautos).* Madlyn Kahr, "Titian's Old Testament Cycle," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 198; Augustine, *City of God,* 141.

exceeding that of Cain, by which he obtained a testimony that he was just, God giving testimony to his gifts; and by it he being dead yet speaketh." This echoes back to the dichotomy between the faithful priest-figure and proto-martyr Abel and the "godless" Cain, and one of the great sins of Cain being loss of faith, as discussed previously.

On the other hand, St. Jerome posits that Cain's offering shows us the hypocrisy of giving up one's material goods while not offering one's internal and spiritual life to God. The apostles, he notes, did not take vows of poverty, but rather gave up their lives to spread the gospel. Therefore, "if we offer to Christ our souls as well as our riches, he will gladly receive our offering. But if we give to God only those things which are without while we give to the devil those things which are within, the division is not fair, and the divine voice says: "Hast thou not sinned in offering aright, and yet not dividing aright?"[464] The parable, then, is not necessarily an exhortation to give up all valuable or personal goods for a faithful life; rather, it is a general reminder of devotion to God over earthly matters and material desires.

In general, while the Cain and Abel story is a departure from the epic tales of the patriarchs that comprise the rest of the series, the potential messages about nonviolence, restraint, piety, temperance, and moral leadership can be easily mapped onto Sigismund's princely persona and agenda. These virtues, as well as the theme of faith triumphing over despair, also carry over into the Noah sequence, which arguably forms the political apotheosis of the *Genesis* series.

[464] Jerome, "Letter to Pammachius," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Volume 6: The Principal Works of St. Jerome*, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 139, https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206/npnf206.i.html.

5.3. *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*

The bridge between the Cain and Abel and Noah sequences is *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*. Serving as the first major peak in action in the *Genesis* series, and a prelude to the apocalyptic imagery of the *Flood*, *Moral Downfall* illustrates the same themes of violence and its horrific repercussions that were rampant in contemporary Polish political and religious literature. At the 1548 *sejm* session, for example, Piotr Boratyński warned that the country was consumed by turmoil and on the brink of civil war.[465] Meanwhile, the Catholic episcopacy in the *sejm* also referenced the end times: Marcin Kromer, Stanisław Górski, and Cardinal Hosius all believed that they were living in "apocalyptic days," and predicted the imminent downfall of their country amidst cataclysmic heresy.[466]

Andrzej Krzycki preceded this wave by nearly thirty years with his treatise in verse on the early Reformation, *Religionis et Reipublicae quaerimonia* (1522), yet his vivid descriptions of civil unrest, especially those with domestic roots, are just as accurate at reflecting the anxieties of the early 1550s:

> Such has the power of the enemy secretly risen,
> Who destroys everything around and threatens imminent downfall.
> And the suffering from outside is not all, for much of it
> Is internal conflict and our own domestic pillaging…
> They eagerly toss all that is holy to the restless crowd,
> And what evil men do, the rabble spreads far and wide.
> Thence the scream and clamour of the people, thus unrest and revolt is born.

He urges the people to value and promote the qualities of good leadership, and to beware of tyrants who use domestic unrest to rise to power. Under such circumstances, "the king's gentleness, such heavenly goodness, is despised, and a cursed thing appears, the

[465] Maciuszko, *Konfederacja*, 62.
[466] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 99.

ruthless will of a tyrant." Furthermore, Krzycki specifically identifies heresy as a main ingredient in the poison of enmity, as "almost no one values piety and honesty" anymore, "the sublime cult of God is tossed aside," and "holy traditions are dead." He continues:

> Nowadays madness confuses what is of God and what is of man...everything has been led
> Into the abyss, to death and destruction…
> And when this plague amidst my good Christians
> Grows deeper roots and so inflames the wrath of God...
> We will all be lost through error and helplessness.[467]

Krzycki's contemporary, Johannes Dantiscus, also frequently drew upon violent apocalyptic imagery in his panegyrics lamenting the religious divisions threatening to seep into Poland from the West. In *Hymni aliquot ecclesiastici* (1548), he directly blames the Reformation for the outbreak of bloody wars across Europe. In *Carmen paraeneticum iuvenïbus huius temporis non inutile* (1539), Dantiscus refers to moral downfall, the abandonment of tradition and ethics, and the corruption of the clergy. He also warns of a repetition of the Peasants' War if the reading of heretical literature and translations of Scripture were to continue uninhibited in Poland.[468]

Like Krzycki and Dantiscus, Modrzewski is more concerned in *De Republica* with internal threats than external ones, for although "great dangers have surrounded us from all sides," if they are "expanded domestically, who then will save us from the wrath of God?"[469] Revisiting the metaphor of the king as "father of the fatherland," he states that "he who plants or cultivates discord among his sons, or who does not try to uproot it, is no

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[467] Andrzej Krzycki, *Religionis et reipublicae quaerimonia*, trans. Jan Michał Harhala, in *Przegląd Klasyczny* 2, no. 4 (1936): 39-42.
[468] Zbigniew Nowak, "Antyreformacyjna elegia Dantyszka o Zagładzie Gdańska," *Odrodzenie Reformacja w Polsce*, no. 17 (1971): 14, 24.
[469] Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 318.

true father."[470] He also highlights the danger of leaders falling prey to wrath and violence:

> We experience this [discord] with wrathful men, who spew the poison of their anger before them...Countless men are sick with these infirmities...even those who would be seen as the conquerors of nations."[471]

According to Modrzewski, this solution lies in the hands of the monarch. In his dedication of *Lascius sive de poena homicidio,* he encourages Sigismund to pursue the protection of peace as the highest calling of the crown. He draws on Sigismund's own words at the 1538 *sejm*: during a debate about punishments for murder, the young heir declared that spilling brotherly blood should be avoided at all costs, and that this was the only way to ensure domestic peace.[472] He relates this more specifically to the religious situation in his dedication to *De ecclesia,* wherein he writes that the increasing factionalisation of reformed groups can lead only to unrest. He urges the king to focus on bringing peace and unity to Christendom, to put all his efforts into Church affairs (by organising a universal synod and sending a Polish delegation to Trent), and to solve confessional disputes through open discussion and debate, not violence.[473] In *De Republica*, he stresses that "all measures should be taken to ensure that war is kept away," and that "it is necessary to strive for peace with all people."[474] A "truly exalted lord" must be "the reason for and guardian of peace and harmony among his subjects."[475] In fact, two of his foremost counsels to Sigismund in *De Republica* are peacekeeping and forgiveness as the marks of a great monarch. He summarises his stance, appealing to Christ's teachings:

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[470] Ibid., 133-134.
[471] Ibid., 230.
[472] Modrzewski, *In lascium sive,* 17-18.
[473] Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 361-362.
[474] Ibid., 304-305.
[475] Ibid., 134.

> Every day we pray that the Kingdom of God would come to us, but what is the Kingdom if not justice, peace, harmony, and brotherly love?... [Christ] gave us the testament of peace and love in a clear voice: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you...By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.[476]

Returning to the paternal motif, Modrzewski states that "it is a fatherly thing to be gracious and forgive one's sons." In dealing with dissenters, a king should do "only that which doctors prescribe: that we should treat opposites with opposites, that we should not be quick to anger toward anyone, harm no one, bear ill will to no one, and treat everyone with grace."[477] In an interesting parallel to the burning buildings in *Moral Downfall* (Fig. 51), he also alludes to the metaphor of smoke, "which rises from the burning of blood" and "makes everything seem greater than it is;" thus, "all counsel and issues must be set aside until the burning of blood is extinguished."[478] Again, he uses the commandment of Christ as justification: "love your enemies: do good to those who hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you: that you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven."[479]

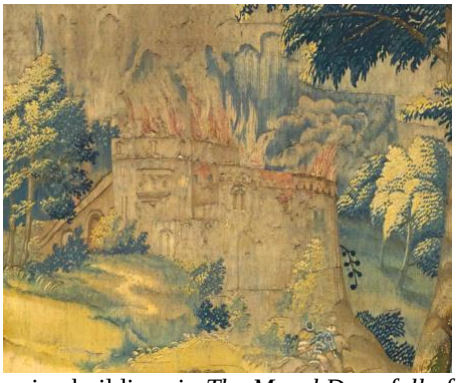

Fig. 53 Burning buildings in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

[476] Ibid., 230.
[477] Ibid, 131, 226.
[478] Ibid., 107.
[479] Ibid., 230.

A recurring theme in these aforementioned political writings is the admonition against tyranny which, interestingly, we find reflected in the tapestry's inscription: "Because of the evil deeds and violences of godless giants and tyrants [*impiorum gigantum et tiiranorum*], God threatens the world with its ruin." Notably, "*impiorum gigantum et tyrannorum*" is not a direct quote from the Vulgate; the corresponding verse (Gen 6:4) mentions only "*gigantes*" and "*potentes a saeculo viri famosi*." The word likely originates from an alternate translation of the original Hebrew "*nphil*," meaning a "bully," "tyrant," or "giant."[480] The popularity of the "tyrant" translation in the sixteenth century may stem in part from both Luther and Calvin. As Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch point out, Luther wrote in his *Lectures on Genesis*: "*Nephilim non dictos a magnitudine corporum, sicut Rabbini putant, sed a tyrannide et oppressione quod vi grassati sint, nulla habita ratione legum aut honestatis, sed simpliciter indulgentes suis voluptatibus et cupiditatibus*."[481] In his own *Commentaries on Genesis*, Calvin also describes the giants as practitioners of "great violence and tyranny," as "certain individuals, who, being stronger than the rest, and relying on their own might and power, exalted themselves unlawfully, and without measure" and "brought destruction and desolation into the world." These men "first exercised tyranny or power in the world, together with an excessive licentiousness and an unbridled lust of dominion."[482] Calvin continues:

> The sum of the whole, however, is that they were ferocious tyrants... Their first fault was pride; because, relying on their own strength, they arrogated to themselves more than was due. Pride produced contempt of God…At the same time, they were

[480] James Strong, "5303," in *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Graham 1890), https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5303.htm (accessed 24 June 2024).
[481] Cited in Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1900), 137.
[482] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal LIbrary, 1996), 264-265, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/genesis/6.htm (accessed 24 June 2024).

> also disdainful and cruel towards men…Moses adds they were "men of renown;" by which he intimates that they boasted of their wickedness, and were what are called, honourable robbers…They cruelly exercised dominion, and acquired power and fame for themselves, by injuring and oppressing their brethren…As ambition is always vicious and more especially so when joined with a tyrannical ferocity, which causes the more powerful to insult the weak, the evil becomes intolerable.[483]

It is necessary to mention that the word "*tyrannus*" in Renaissance Latin did not always translate to "tyrant" in all contexts. In Jan Maczyński's *Lexicon Latino Polonicum* (1564), "*tyrannus*" has two definitions: as a synonym for "king," and as "one who rules not according to the law but according to his own will, whether that be lawful or unlawful." Here, there is a distinct echo of Calvin's definition of "tyranny," that of lawless and unbridled rule. Notably, in the *Lexico Latino Polonicum*, all other derivatives of "*tyrannus*" ("*tyrannis,*" "*tyrannicus*") are based on this second definition.[484] This second definition was by far the dominant of the two, both in Poland and in Europe in general. In fact, the concept of "tyrant" had gained negative connotations as early as the late Classical period in Greece, when Plato denounced rule by tyranny in *The Republic*.[485]

In the context of this tapestry and common hermeneutic understandings of the "giants" of Genesis 6, a Polish viewer would almost certainly interpret the inscription according to the negative and dominant definition of "*tyrannus*," as a tyrant rather than simply a ruler.

The political implications of this are quite important for a series centred on kingship, especially considering the explicit discussions of tyranny in Polish political literature at the time. We find this especially in Modrzewski's *De Republica,* which

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[483] Ibid., 267-268.
[484] Jan Maczyński, *Lexicon Latino Polonicum ex optimis Latinae linguae Scriptoribus concinnatum, Ioanne Maczinsky Equite Polono interprete* (Königsberg: Jan Daubman, 1564), 471.
[485] See Book VIII of Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Christopher Rowe (London: Penguin, 2012).

frequently references the evils of tyranny (using this exact word) in its discussions of kingship and government. In the opening pages of the treatise, Modrzewski writes that "when one rules according to one's whims and will, then this is called a tyranny."[486] A tyrant is one who "sows the seeds of enmity among lords, so that they may more easily enact what strife allows."[487] Indeed, violence and discord are crucial to the portrayal of tyranny in *De Republica*. Later, Modrzewski elaborates:

> What could be a crueller rule, what tyranny more fierce, than that of anger, strife, unrest, unchecked avarice, a desire to lead, and dishonourable wishes, which eclipse the light of goodness, take away free will, and tear apart the man who is subject to it [a tyrant]?[488]

In a subsequent passage, Modrzewski even draws a comparison between tyrants and Cain. He writes:

> Who, then, are the bears, the leopards, the fierce and terrifying beasts…if not they who rule with such great tyranny and defend it? And who else if the progeny of Cain…if not they who give so many justifications for murder?[489]

Modrzewski exhorts the king to rule "according to the concordance of all of the estates and by upholding the laws," and not, as in some other kingdoms, in which kings "introduce taxes at will, and start wars with their opponents…and even if they often act for the sake and good of the Republic, but do not uphold the law, they easily slip into the aforementioned tyranny, in which everything may be done according to the ruler's wishes."[490] For Modrzewski, lawful kingship is the cornerstone of good government, and the best bulwark against tyranny, for "the Republic is to be ruled not according to the will

[486] Modrzewski, *De Republica,* 98.
[487] Ibid., 133.
[488] Ibid., 145.
[489] Ibid., 151.
[490] Ibid., 122.

of the king, but according to the written laws. It is a tyrant's view that a king could act against the law."[491] Another antidote to tyranny is virtue and selflessness of the ruler. God ordained that "royal power easily slips into tyranny, if it is not bestowed upon a man of incredible virtue," and the king should "do all things not for his own benefit, for this a tyrannical thing, but for the good of those he rules."[492] In this context, the "giants and tyrants" of *Moral Downfall* are a bold and ominous warning for a ruler such as Sigismund.

In approving a tapestry depicting such an episode with such a politically charged inscription, in a series so directly linked to his kingship project, Sigismund must have known that a viewer would have picked up on the use of this loaded word, "*tyrannorum*," especially since it is not found in the familiar Vulgate verses. Therefore, any reading of *Moral Downfall* should take this word under careful consideration. From Sigismund's perspective, the tapestry conveys the results of incompetent, immoral, and faithless kingship, the "tyranny" that results from despots taking control in times of chaos and lawlessness. In order to avoid such a situation, the king must lead with virtue and strength, while his subjects must accept his leadership and live in peace with one another. *Moral Downfall* shows the consequences of tyranny, while the subsequent Noah tapestries provide a model for the latter scenario.

For his part, Orzechowski does not mention either giants or tyrants in his description of *Moral Downfall*. He describes the tapestry thusly:

> On the eighth we have proof that the evil crow lays evil eggs. For the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain's progeny were. There you could see the rape of the noble virgins for the purpose of adultery, the violation of the matrons, the pillaging of cities, the theft of private property, the bloodshed and blatant violence, such that

[491] Ibid., 301.
[492] Ibid., 247, 128.

this progeny was certainly worthy of such a father.[493]

While Orzechowski may not use the tapestry for a political gloss, his litany of violence heightens the reader's understanding of the scale and severity of the tyrannical actions that *Moral Downfall* depicts. Interestingly, his mention of "the theft of private property" also touches on the lawless aspect of tyranny which Modrzewski discusses. What is more noteworthy about Orzechowski's description is his focus on sexual violence. This may be because Orzechowski saw parallels between the tapestry's central scene of the nude women abducted by a mounted rider (Fig. 52) and classical myths of rape such as that of Europa, of Lucretia, and of the Sabine women. However, one phrase that Orzechowski uses may indicate that this is another attempt at a moral gloss: "*virgines ad stuprum rapi."* When it comes to the rape in *Moral Downfall,* Orzechowski does not highlight its violence, rather that is was "for the purpose of adultery/illicit sex (*ad stuprum*)." In other words, Orzechowski's choice of words frames the rape as a result of unfettered passions, similarly to his descriptions of the passions of Cain.

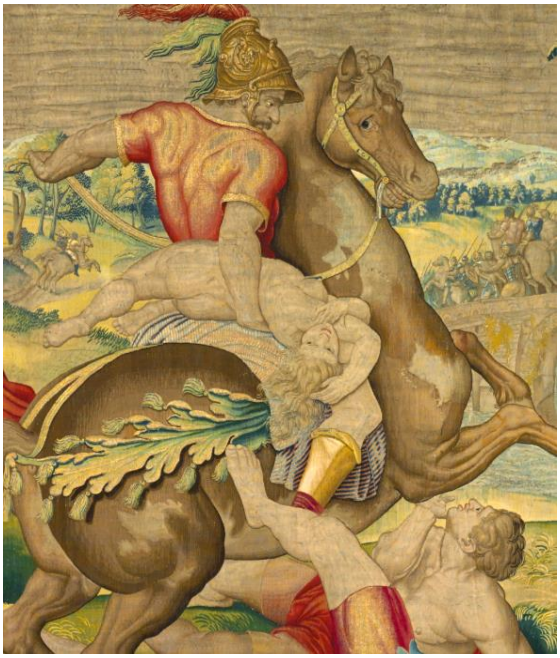

Fig. 54 The rape of virgins by "giants and tyrants" in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

[493] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy,* 53-54.

In the end, however, *Moral Downfall*'s vision of cataclysmic corruption does not necessarily precipitate a message of despair for the human race, indelibly tainted by Original Sin, abandoned by its Creator. As mentioned earlier, *Downfall*'s position within the sequence of the *Genesis* tapestries reassures the viewer of the divine plan for salvation. It is directly succeeded by *God Converses with Noah*, one of the most hopeful and optimistic images in the series, and the one which most closely replicates the cosmic harmony of *Paradise Bliss.* At the 1553 unveiling, it ended the "bedchamber" series, but was immediately followed by the Moses set in the adjoining antechamber, which (as we will see in section 5.5) had many moments of hope and triumph. Consequently, taking the content of the tapestries directly following *Moral Downfall* under consideration leaves us with a significantly less bleak reading of its scenes of violence.

In sum, *The Moral Downfall of Mankind* can be read as a reflection of Sigismund's strategy for unrest in his kingdom. The tapestry warns the viewer of the consequences of bloodshed (especially domestic), corruption, wrath, and stoking the fires of discord. It may be a commentary on the apocalyptic rhetoric dominating Polish political and religious culture, and the increasing tension between and polarisation of factions. Ultimately, however, both the biblical and display chronologies leave the viewer with an undercurrent of hope in an ultimately benevolent Creator who has not abandoned His divine theatre or His children. There is a promise of a way out of catastrophe. The solution proposed by Modrzewski, adopted by Sigismund, and showcased in the outcome of the Noah series, is actively promoting peace and forgiveness, in imitation of Christ.

5.4. Noah

The choice to use the story of Noah for a politically and theologically charged tapestry series is no accident: it ties directly into the contemporary trend of providential

theology and associated cataclysmic imagery in both sixteenth century Catholicism and Protestantism. According to providential thinking, God actively intervened in human affairs, whether to reward or punish, and communicated with mankind through signs and warnings, such as astronomical omens, crop yields, or natural disasters. For example, there was a pervasive belief across Europe that contemporary floods were God's punishments for sin, known in German as *Sündenflüssen*. According to Luther's commentaries on Genesis (1540-1545), the Fall had not only corrupted mankind but nature as well, creating a kind of ticking time bomb of natural disasters and cataclysms. The Flood had sped up this process of destruction and decay.[494] Alexandra Walsham has analysed how Reformed theology was also prone to providentialism, in which all such events, catastrophic or trivial, were signs for the elect, and should be interpreted seriously as messages from the Lord. There was a common conception among providential thinkers that prayer and penance could hold back assuage these disasters. English sermons routinely used natural disasters as warnings for congregations to return to the path of righteousness. Alongside the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, one of the most common biblical examples cited was the Genesis Flood.[495]

Likewise, natural and social disasters were rampant in sixteenth century Polish religious and political treatises, and even in the farmer's almanack: the 1555 edition predicted intense plagues, fires in cities, military unrest, conflicts between citizens, earthquakes, the introduction of new laws, the growth of religious sects, and, enigmatically, "changes in the kingdom."[496] One of the most literal examples of Flood imagery in Polish literature is Johannes Dantiscus's *The Prophet Jonah*, which compares the "fall" of the city

[494] Michael Kempe, "Noah's Flood: The Genesis Story and Natural Disasters in Early Modern Times," *Environment and History* 9, no. 2 (2003): 152, 154.
[495] Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16, 118, 125, 128, 150, 299, 330.
[496] Cynarski, *Zygmunt August*, 99.

of Gdańsk to the Lutheran Reformation to Jonah's prophecy of the destruction of Nineveh. Specifically, Dantiscus mentions the flood, "impossible to forget," as a plague sent by God to punish the city for its impiety, pride, excess, and separatist and anarchist ambitions.[497] In 1551, the Protestant poet Jacob Kuchler wrote *Historia Ionae Prophetae carmine elegiaco* in response, comparing Kraków to Nineveh, and urging the city to accept Lutheranism in the footsteps of Gdańsk.[498] Similarly, in *Religionis et reipublicae quaerimonia*, Krzycki laments the state of a kingdom torn apart by the storms and floods of religious and political division:

> It is no secret that the ark of the Church is still beaten by winds,
> They may lead the captain into sin as he sleeps deeply…
> You will have the opportunity, I hope, to steer your ship away from such great waves,
> And from such mighty tempests. As the light after a storm shines,
> Christ reveals Himself, and never abandons His own.[499]

Here, Krzycki introduces the notion of the Polish Church as the Ark (see Fig. 53), a shelter for weathering the storms of dissent. This is in accordance with the New Testament understanding of the Flood narrative: In 1 Peter 3:18-22, the apostle likens the Flood to salvation through Christ's resurrection, and describes baptism as "being of the like form" of the Flood which purified and renewed the Earth. Just as the Ark was the one refuge from the Flood, baptism into the Church is the one path to eternal salvation.[500] Calvin echoes this interpretation in the *Institutes*, again drawing directly on flood imagery:

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[497] Johannes Dantiscus, *Jonas Propheta de interitu civitatis Gedanensis* (Kraków: Wietor, 1535), https://www.czytanki.pl/jonasz-prorok-o-zniszczeniu-gdanska (accessed 22 August 2021).
This is likely a reference to the real-life floods in Gdańsk in August 1528 and March 1529. Nowak, "Elegia," 18.

[498] Angelika Modlińska-Piekarz, "Doktryna i polityka w łacińskiej poezji biblijnej śląskich uczniów Filipa Melanchtona," *Odrodzenie i Reformacja w Polsce* 61 (2017): 198.

[499] Krzycki, *Religionis,* 42.

[500] According to Don Cameron Allen, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, "endless comparisons were made between the waters of the flood and those of baptism." Allen, *The Legend of Noah,* 139.

> When the sky is overcast with dense clouds, and a violent tempest arises, the darkness which is presented to our eye, and the thunder which strikes our ears, and stupefies all our senses with terror, make us imagine that everything is thrown into confusion, though in the firmament itself all continues quiet and serene. In the same way, when the tumultuous aspect of human affairs unfits us for judging, we should still hold, that God, in the pure light of his justice and wisdom, keeps all these commotions in due subordination, and conducts them to their proper end.[501]

Fig. 55 The Ark in *The Flood*.

In his dedication letter to Sigismund in *De Republica,* Modrzewski uses the image of the king helming a ship, "*tanti imperii in maximis fluctibus*."[502] In fact, *De Republica* makes frequent use of the Flood and Ark allegory. In his extended metaphor, as with Dantiscus, Krzycki, and Kuchler, the Flood is the tempest of religious conflict, the Ark is the Polish Church (or the Christian kingdom more generally), and the captain is the king. Paraphrasing Cicero, he states that, "like a captain," a king "should maintain smooth sailing" for his Ark.[503] As such, he should promote "the honour of eternal God" above all, "for God will give great rewards to those who believe in Him; and will punish those who molest His followers...with flood and war." The captain and his "sailors" must, therefore,

[501] Calvin, *Institutes*, 187.
[502] Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 83.
[503] Ibid., 130.

hold fast to faith and guard themselves against evil influences; otherwise, when they are "drowning in the waters of the sea," they "will not be rescued" (see Fig. 54).[504] Orzechowski's descriptions of the Noah subset echo this moral warning. His characterisation of God in *God Converses with Noah* focuses on divine anger: "the avenger of evil…enraged at the progeny of Cain" who wanted to "bury the aforementioned criminals."[505]

Fig. 56 Some of the drowning progeny of Cain in *The Flood*.

The "captain," as exemplified by Noah, should have unconditional faith in God, even in the darkest hour. In the tapestry inscriptions, Noah's faith is directly referenced in *The Building of the Ark* ("By his faith Noah builds an Ark for the salvation of his house"), and is contrasted to the *impius* progeny of Cain (in *The Building of the Ark*, "the godless mock him," and again in *The Animals Enter the Ark*, "the godless laugh at him"). As with Abel, the secondary citation of Hebrews 11 (here, Heb 11:6-7) in the inscription of *The Building of the Ark* highlights unwavering faith as Noah's dominant virtue:

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[504] Ibid., 100.
[505] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 54.

> But without faith it is impossible to please God. For he that cometh to God, must believe that he is, and is a rewarder to them that seek him. By faith Noe, having received an answer concerning those things which as yet were not seen, moved with fear, framed the ark for the saving of his house, by the which he condemned the world; and was instituted heir of justice which is by faith.

This echoes the dichotomy between pious Abel and godless Cain in the previous subset.

When applied to Sigismund, this repeating theme of "faith" in *Genesis* should be understood in two ways: as faith in the spiritual sense, and faith in the secular sense (i.e. trust and loyalty). In fact, the Latin *fides* which appears throughout the tapestry inscriptions can be translated in both of these ways. As a leader of men, like the patriarchs, a king should have faith, recognising his subservient position to God and the need for divine guidance in earthly matters. As a result, a king will be blessed with spiritual wisdom and gifts, which will allow him to keep his kingdom united and on a righteous and prosperous path. However, this must be reciprocal: a king following this example is deserving of the loyalty (secular "faith") of his subjects, who themselves accept their subservient position to him and the need for his strong leadership. Thus, for both the king and his subjects, the key is to have faith in one's natural superiors, without whom there can be no hope of earthly or spiritual flourishing.

For Modrzewski, as in most models of sixteenth-century European kingship, faith is indeed a predominant princely virtue, especially in the spiritual sense. In any matter of church or state, he believes that "it best to refer it to God, without whose help any human effort, no matter how great, cannot bring anything to fruition."[506]Accordingly, he advises Sigismund that "an exalted lord must know that...the strength of man can do little compared

[506] Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 96.

to the grace of God," and he "must humbly ask God to fill him with His grace in all matters of rule" for:

> If he will not follow the road of God's commandments...he will be cast away from God, and the kingdom...will be severed from him and given to another; and he will also be separated by the Holy Spirit, and given to the spirit of evil, and he will see all his sons slain in battle, and he himself will be wounded.[507]

In the end, the reward for adept and steadfast "captaining" is the welfare of the kingdom, as Noah's story proves. Indeed, the inscription of *The Building of the Ark* states that "Noah builds an Ark for the salvation of his house." After successfully protecting and guiding his people through disaster, Noah received lordship over fertile land and times of peace and prosperity, as is illustrated in the *The Animals Exit the Ark* and *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*. Notably, here, Orzechowski's description of God changes from a wrathful God to a "merciful God," whose "love for us" he notes in *God Blesses Noah's Family*.[508] Thus, one can deduce from the Noah series that a king who follows the example of Noah will be blessed, as will his kingdom.

However, Orzechowski's account of the Flood and its aftermath focuses more on the cautionary elements than the triumph of Noah's faith and virtue. For example, the "particular ornament" that he picks out of *The Animals Exit the Ark* is not the scene of Noah's family making a joyful offering to a merciful God, but "the flaccid remains of the drowned, rotting in the water and putrid." His longest and most vivid description is of *The Flood* tapestry, which evokes the terror and torment of the drowning:

> On the fourth you could see the heavens split with a downpour, the open abyss, and the skies pouring out a storm with thunder and lightning. Struck with fear, the

[507] Ibid., 138.
[508] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 55.

> godless progeny fell to the ground. Here, you could see the shameful flight of Cain's progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences, some climbing trees in the overflowing waters, others climbing exposed rocks, and others seeking the high mountains. This tapestry was so full of confusion and so terrified the viewer that he himself, struck dumb at such a horrible sight, feared for himself in the flood and longed for the Ark.[509]

The end of this description, which directly references the affective response of the viewer, echoes the emotions of the exile scene in *Paradise Bliss*, in which "looking on, you would say that you, too, were condemned, and that a sentence had been proclaimed on you as well."[510] In *Noah's Thanksgiving Sacrifice*, he returns to the theme of punishment for sin in his interpretation of the colours of the rainbow:

> One [colour], like water, maintaining our memory of the terrible flood, the second pale-coloured, foretelling that the Church will never be without its cross, and the third like fire, which never ends, showing us the eternal punishment awaiting the godless.[511]

In the next paragraph, we find the aforementioned conclusion of Sigismund placing himself below "the King of Kings…in whom there is always a ready punishment for sin." In this way, Orzechowski draws on the theme of punishment and retribution throughout the series as a moral exhortation both to the viewer and the patron. The description of the rainbow in particular, with the everlasting "memory of the terrible flood," the "fire which never ends" and the Church that "will never be without its cross," presents the Flood not as a horror of the past but as an example of the consequences of sin and faithlessness, just as relevant to the moral and spiritual plights of sixteenth-century Poland as to diluvian Mesopotamia.

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[509] Ibid., 54-55.
[510] Ibid., 53.
[511] Ibid., 55.

Fig. 57 Noah overseeing *The Building of the Ark*.

Fig. 58 Noah watching as *The Animals Enter the Ark*.

In addition to his faith and trust in God, Noah had many attributes that aligned well with princely virtue. As both the biological and spiritual successor of Adam, Noah was similarly typified by his wisdom, paternal leadership, and closeness to God. He was an architect, a captain, a navigator, and the protector of life on earth during an unfathomable catastrophe (see Fig. 55 and 56). His dynastic successes, delineated in Genesis 10, make him another father of nations. Returning again to the genealogical metaphor, Noah's salvation of his family through building the Ark is an example of the fruits of strong patriarchal leadership and the blessings bestowed on godly "households," be it a family (or a dynasty) or a kingdom.[512]

Like Adam, Noah is a fallible protagonist susceptible to sin, as depicted in the final tapestry, *Noah's Drunkenness* (Fig. 57). Unlike Adam, whose atonement is shown in the *Genesis* series, Noah's story ends with this episode of weakness. In the biblical text, though, the focus of the story of Noah's drunkenness is the sin of his son Ham, who reveals his father's nakedness to his brothers, after which Noah curses Ham and his land of Canaan. Here, we encounter another narrative rhyme to previous tapestries, this time with the curse

[512] Walsham, *Generations*, 60.

and exile of Cain. Nevertheless, Noah's fallibility likens him to the other patriarchs of the *Genesis* series, whose great deeds and virtues do not exempt them from human failure. This provides the viewer with a remarkably humbled and nuanced view of the characters that would be exemplars for a king, as well as a negative mirror for the princely virtues that *Genesis* promotes.

Fig. 59 Noah's sin in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

As the final entry of the *Noah* sequence (and, therefore, of *Genesis*), *Noah's Drunkenness* is a somewhat unexpected coda, not only because of the greater scale and grandeur of the preceding tapestries, but because of the apparent narrative disconnect between it and the rest of the Noah series. The previous tapestry, *God Blesses Noah's Family*, seemingly wraps up the Flood narrative, whereas *Noah's Drunkenness* takes us to a completely different location (a forest instead of the floodplain), and focuses on characters who previously had only been in the background (Noah's sons). Moreover, unlike the optimism and joy of *God Blesses Noah's Family* (in the actual tapestry, although

Orzechowski's description takes a more ominous tone), *Noah's Drunkenness* ends the series at perhaps the lowest moment for its protagonist.[513]

Nevertheless, it is important to note that there are thematic links between this final tapestry and those preceding. For example, it reprises the motif of husbandry from the previous two subsets, as Noah, the first vintner is the successor of Adam, the first farmer and Abel, the first shepherd. The image of Noah tending his vines in the background (Fig. 58) recalls the message of patriarchal cultivation of virtue and morality in a family and in a kingdom, as conveyed by the previous protagonists of the series.

Fig. 60 Noah the Vintner in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

The repeated theme of the humility and fallibility of the *Genesis* protagonists provides the clearest moral and theological motif. Strikingly, the largest-scale and most magnificent subset of the tapestries with the most drama and action ends up bringing the

[513] As noted previously, Orzechowski's ekphrasis does not mention *Noah's Drunkenness*; his account ends with *God Blesses Noah's Family*. It is possible that this tapestry was not completed in time for the wedding, although this is somewhat dubious considering that the commissioning process began at least seven years earlier, and it was made by the same workshops and at the same time as the preceding tapestries. It is also possible that Orzechowski, who was not a courtier and would therefore have only been able to view the tapestries once, during the wedding, simply forgot it in his account. Alternatively, he may have taken a creative liberty, perhaps finding it awkward or puzzling to end a laudatory *ekphrasis* centred on the person of the king on a comparatively "low note."

viewer, very literally, back down to earth in its denouement. We are reminded of the frailty of even the greatest of men, even those elected by God, as all men are inheritors of original sin from Adam. Every story in *Genesis*, therefore, shows yet another episode of the consequences of the Fall, and the need for repentance and constant spiritual improvement.

On the other hand, anyone familiar with the basics of the Genesis story (that is, anyone present at the unveiling) would have been aware that this episode is not the canonical end of Noah's tale. The wrongdoer, Ham, is punished, and this incident does not tarnish Noah's reputation or mar his legacy. Immediately after this account, the next chapter of Genesis is the "Table of Nations," outlining the descendants of Noah's other two sons, Shem and Japeth. The episode is also a call-back to the familial motif of the series. Like Cain, Ham is a sower of familial strife: in this case, by breaking the commandment to honour one's parents (see Fig. 59).[514] On a literal level, this is an affront to Noah's authority as the father of a household, but it may also be a metaphor for a challenge to appropriate authority over a kingdom, based on the patriarchal family model.

It is also worthy of note that, in the tapestry, the unconscious Noah is portrayed as a pitiful and almost helpless character, dwarfed by his sons. The aggressor in the situation is clearly Ham, caught in the process of absconding with Noah's robe, as Shem and Japeth try to intervene. Moreover, in the background, we see another version of Noah hard at work, tilling his crops. Thus, Noah is not depicted as bearing the moral brunt of the situation or being punished, unlike Adam in *Paradise Bliss*. Rather than a grave sin, this is a moment of human weakness that is contrasted even within the same frame with a much more positive and characteristic portrayal of Noah.

[514] Walsham, *Generations*, 175.

Fig. 61 The sons of Noah (Ham in armour on the right) in *Noah's Drunkenness*.

In short, the initial impression that *Noah's Drunkenness* ends the series on a somewhat disconnected or pessimistic note is misleading. It can be seen as an important footnote to the rest of the story: Noah is finally shown to be truly human, susceptible to the same flaws as any other leader, but it is made clear that this does not define him nor detract from the other great qualities established through his deeds throughout the series. Here, then, we find a reiteration of one of the underlying themes of *Genesis*: the ability for leaders to achieve great things as God's elect, falter as men tainted by original sin, and yet repent and continue to lead in faith and virtue as fathers and cultivators of their kingdom.

5.5. Moses

Lacking any images or descriptions of the *Moses* tapestries (even Orzechowski is perfunct, only listing the titles), it is still possible to interrogate the choice of Moses for Sigismund's final patriarchal exemplar.

Of all of the protagonists of the *Genesis* series, Moses is perhaps the most illustrious: a prophet, the leader of the freed Israelites, the Lawgiver, and the legendary

author of the Pentateuch. As the recipient of the Mosaic Law, he was the representative of God's covenant with His chosen people and the earthly governor of morality. For his role in leading the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery and into the Promised Land, he is a proto-Christ saviour. In fact, he is a breaker-of-chains twice over, having freed his people from both literal and figurative bondage (slavery to worldliness, idolatry, faithlessness, and sin).[515] Like Christ, he also had the power of prophecy, acted as a conduit for miracles (e.g. the gift of manna), and was granted healing powers through Nehushtan, the bronze serpent (see Fig. 60). Additionally, he was a successful military commander, including in his victory over the Amalekites (depicted in the final *Moses* tapestry).

Fig. 62 Michiel Coxcie, *The Israelites afflicted by a plague of serpents; two men worshipping the brazen serpent erected by Moses*, c. 1550-1600, ink on paper. London, Wellcome Collection.

[515] Michael J. B. Allen, "Marsilio Ficino on Power, on Wisdom, and on Moses," in *Et Amicorum: Essays on Renaissance Humanism and Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Ossa-Richardson and Margaret Meserve (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 312.

Moses's standing as one of the historical paragons of human achievement was well-established by Augustine, Aquinas, and the humanists that followed them. He was the inventor of political theory, law, theology, and history, and a true "Renaissance man:" a mystic, a warrior, a lawyer, an artist, a poet, a philosopher.[516] For Italian Neoplatonists and artists such as Michelangelo, Moses was the original philosopher-king, one who, according to Michael J.B. Allen, "unites wisdom with power, *virtus* with *virtu*."[517] He represented a perfect synthesis between "vision and action," in Erwin Panofsky's words, a man who had achieved "spiritual immortality" during his life and "saw with an inner eye."[518]

Similarly to Adam, Moses also had a particular reputation among the Neoplatonists as a recipient of esoteric knowledge. For Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), Moses's ascent to Mt. Sinai and conversation with God, after which he was bestowed with the divine light of knowledge and *agape*, was the model for the Platonic ascent to communion with the supranatural One.[519] According to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494), in order to write the Pentateuch, Moses had to pass through forty-nine Gates of Understanding, each related to an element of creation, in order to reach a fiftieth, leading to union with God. When Moses received the oral Torah on Mt. Sinai, he also received secret laws that he could only pass on to a lineage of select high priests. These would become the *kabbalah*. Thus, just as Adam was bestowed with the sacred language of creation, Moses was "but little removed from the living well-spring of the most holy and ineffable understanding."

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[516] Geerken, "Moses," 587.
[517] Allen, "Ficino," 312.
[518] Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 92-93
[519] Allen, "Ficino," 309-311.

Consequently, Mirandola exhorts his readers to follow Moses's example to gain a deeper understanding of creation and cosmology beyond the physical realm.[520]

In Book One ("On Tradition") of *De Republica,* Modrzewski uses Moses as the ur-example of a divinely-appointed king. In the "times of Moses," he argues, one man ruled over his subjects, and was responsible for solving disputes and troubles in the nation and for keeping peace. This was established by God's command in Deuteronomy 1:12: "Let me have from among you wise and understanding men, and such whose conversation is approved among your tribes, that I may appoint them your rulers."[521] However, he also uses Moses to make an argument for the necessity of the *sejm* for the proper functioning of the kingdom: later in the same book, he posits that Moses, the "greatest ruler of God's chosen people," surrounded himself with the wisest and noblest of his followers and heeded their counsel.[522]

Arguably, the Moses story also features a repetition of the themes from the Noah story of the purification of a kingdom through the stewardship of a godly leader. Augustine considers some of Moses's most laudatory qualities to be his patience and perseverance in leading his errant people. He was vigilant and reproving of his people when necessary, but always ruled with love and justice. His unshakeable faith was especially evident, Augustine claims, in interceding for his followers, no matter how many times they broke God's commandments or strayed from his guidance.[523] In his sermons on Exodus, Girolamo Savonarola explains that Moses is a representation of believers, Pharaoh is the devil, Egypt

[520] Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man,* trans. Charles Glenn Wallis et al (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 68-69.
[521] Modrzewski, *De Republica,* 99.
[522] Ibid., 139.
[523] Augustine of Hippo, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), Book 22.69, 298. See also Hall, "Moses," 88.

is the land of darkness and sin, and the Red Sea through which Moses led the Israelites is the purifying waters of baptism.[524]

Extrapolating from all this, a king relying on the example of Moses could draw on many of the patriarch's qualities. Sigismund's set included an example of his military leadership (*The Battle with the Amalekites*), his proximity to God, access to divine knowledge, and moral stewardship (*Moses Sent to Egypt*, i.e. the encounter with the burning bush, and *The Ten Commandments*), and his miraculous powers as leader and saviour of the Israelites (*The Crossing of the Red Sea*). The scene *Moses Speaks with Pharaoh* may also hint at Moses's reliance on wise counsel, as he asked his brother Aaron to speak for him during the meeting with Pharaoh, knowing his own oratorical limitations. Similarly, the episode on Mt. Sinai may refer to Moses's diplomatic skills, as well as his understanding of justice. Upon seeing the Israelites worshipping the golden calf at the foot of the mountain, Moses negotiated with God to spare the people from total destruction, although he himself commanded the death of three thousand men as retribution for the sin. Here, therefore, we see a theme similar to the story of Cain: that of righteous punishment and divine justice.[525]

In short, we find in Moses a princely exemplar with steadfast faith, strong leadership, military and political acumen, fearlessness in the face of persecution, and a profound personal connection to the divine. The Neoplatonic angle that was so popular at the Polish court would have added another layer: that of Moses as the second example in the *Genesis* series of a divinely-appointed philosopher with access to arcane wisdom.

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[524] Geerken, "Moses," 587.

[525] Geerken, "Moses," 581, 589. Notably, the only other known set of Flemish *Moses* tapestries from this period, commissioned by Ferrante Gonzaga, includes the golden calf episode in the *Ten Commandments* tapestry, so it is possible that Sigismund's piece may have also featured this vignette.

Like Noah, Moses's successes as a leader stemmed from his courage and unshakeable trust in God, even in the direst circumstances. This exegesis was canonised by many of the early Church Fathers, who presented Moses as a humble recipient of God's call and a courageous leader of his chosen people. As Christopher A. Hall writes, Moses "illustrated the hardships and hopes of the pilgrim believer in God, journeying through the wilderness toward home," and presented a "roadmap" for the spiritual ascent of a Christian.[526]

However, like Adam, Moses's story is punctuated by a watershed moment of sin, from which he must free himself in order to fulfil God's plan. In Moses's case, it is the murder of an Egyptian soldier attacking an Israelite that leads to his flight from Pharaoh's punishment and his eventual confrontation with God in the desert, who commands him to return to Egypt and free the Israelites from slavery. Interestingly, the *Moses* tapestry sequence begins with this very episode of Moses's first encounter with God after the murder and self-imposed exile. We are dropped into the story of Moses at his lowest point, with the protagonist reckoning with his past and accepting a divine command to change his path. Again, therefore, we find that the protagonist of the sequence, while a paragon of princely virtue in many respects, is not immune to sin, weakness, and failure. Rather, he proves that even great men can overcome original sin and weakness in the service of goodness and justice.[527]

Beyond these general reflections on the subject matter of the tapestries, it is not possible to go further with an analysis of the Moses series without any visual records or

[526] Christopher A. Hall, "Moses and the Church Fathers," in *Illuminating Moses*: *A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance*, ed. Jane Beal (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 81, 100.
[527] One noteworthy interpretation of Moses's sin comes from Augustine, who reframes the murder as an example of religious zeal gone awry. Comparing Moses to St. Paul, who also possessed "fierce energy" and "unwise zeal," Augustine claims that Moses's love of God combined with a lack of restraint led to a moral failing. Augustine, *Reply to Faustus*, 88-89.

more detailed descriptions than Orzechowski's list of topics. However, it is possible to examine the impacts of including a Moses series on the metanarrative of the *Genesis* series.

5.6. A *Genesis* Cycle?

One of the issues that arise from Orzechowski's account of the wedding tapestries is the strange chronology: the Moses set is placed in an antechamber between the bedchamber (Adam and Eve/Cain and Abel set) and the Senator's Hall (Noah set). This is not to say that this was the series' "intended" order; undoubtedly, Sigismund and the tapestry artists were well aware of the basic pentateuchal chronology. However, this is the chronology for at least the initial unveiling, and is the only sequence of display recorded in writing. (We have no records of the order of display of *Genesis* in other settings.) Therefore, initial viewers would have walked through the events out of order, ending with *Noah's Drunkenness*, although this may have changed in different display arrangements at different locations.

A main part of the reasoning for this arrangement may have been the dimensions and magnificence of the Noah set in comparison to the rest, and therefore the desire to display them in the most public of the chambers. In addition, due to the size of the Noah set, the floorplan of Wawel simply may have necessitated such an arrangement. On the other hand, this may have been a very intentional choice for the purposes of the 1553 unveiling: it is reasonable to assume that Sigismund would have wanted his tour of the tapestries to crescendo with the Noah set, the most magnificent pieces in the most magnificent chamber, rather than the shorter (and perhaps less dramatic) Moses set.

However, when considering the messages of the *Genesis* series as a whole, the bookend of *Noah's Drunkenness* rather than *The Battle with the Amalekites* may have served an important narrative goal: it allows us to read *Genesis* as a cycle rather than a

series. Had the series ended with a battle, it may have been a rather unexpected and even disjointed denouement. The only prior battle scene is the destruction of Cain's cursed progeny in *The Moral Downfall of Mankind,* in which armed conflict is shown as obviously evil, and themes of "righteous" military leadership and victory are notably absent from the rest of the series. However, *Noah's Drunkenness* returns us to a garden-like setting, with a prominently-placed tree that is markedly similar to the Tree of Life in *Paradise Bliss,* albeit without fruit. The eagle atop the Tree of Life is replaced with an all-seeing owl (Fig. 61). Furthermore, both tapestries feature the "fall" of a protagonist (both involving shame from nakedness), and leave the viewer with an open-ended narrative.[528] In the isolated context of the tapestries, the fate of the characters and their descendants is left unresolved. The inscriptions also hint toward a cyclical narrative in their repetitive phrasing. For example, both Abel and Noah act according to God's will "*per fidem*" (*Abel's Sacrifice* and *The Building of the Ark*), and the series's antagonists, Cain and his descendants, are presented as a continuously evil presence through the descriptor "*impius*" ("impious" or "godless"). These linguistic similarities invoke the recurring dichotomy between faith and faithlessness in the series, exemplified by Abel versus Cain and Noah versus Cain's descendants.

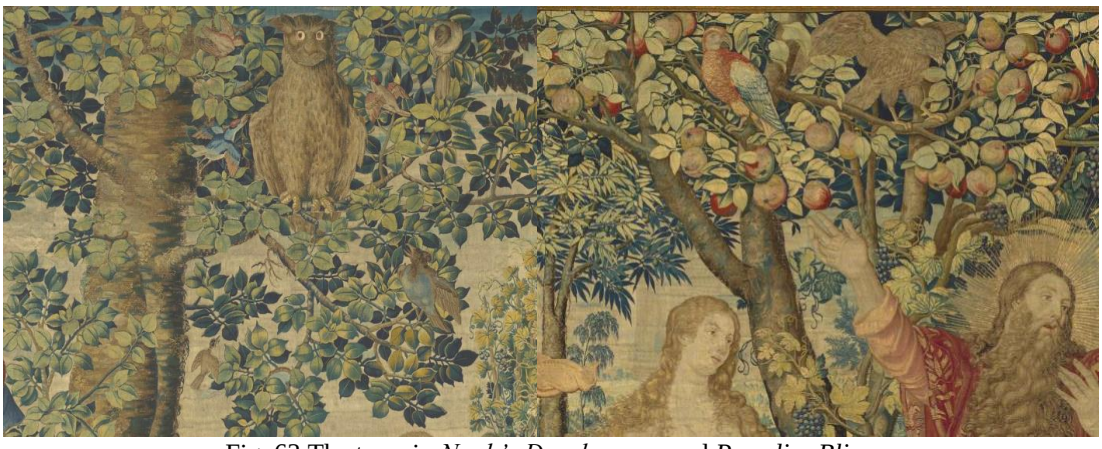

Fig. 63 The trees in *Noah's Drunkenness* and *Paradise Bliss*.

[528] It is also noteworthy that both *Paradise Bliss* and *Noah's Drunkenness* feature continuous narration, portraying their story in episodes rather than in one scene. These are the only two extant tapestries to use this mode of narration.

Hermeneutically speaking, there are many established precedents for cyclical intertextuality across Genesis and Exodus. For example, as biblical scholar Keith Bodner notes, the Hebrew *tebah* is used both for Noah's Ark and for the basket from which the baby Moses was saved in the river. This infers a parallel between two saviour figures, saved from water by God and chosen to lead His chosen people out of chaos and violence.[529] While the *Genesis* tapestries do not include a visual reference between the Ark and the basket, as there is no episode of Moses being found among the bulrushes, there are many other intertextual nods among the episodes that are shown.

In the creation narrative, God separates the "waters above" from the "waters below" the earth, creating dry land which will be used for the creation of life. During the Flood, this division is removed as water once again claims dry land, destroying most life and returning earth to the pre-Genesis watery chaos. Then, life on earth is effectively "re-created" through Noah's Ark. Later, the Flood is again reversed through the parting of the Red Sea, which provides safe passage through the waters (like the Ark) for the Israelites. In his letter to Oceanus, St. Jerome elucidates this very same progression of the symbol of water from the third day of creation to the waters of Eden, to the purifying Flood, to the "rebirth" of the freed Israelites after crossing the Red Sea.[530]

To use another example, Adam and Eve hiding from God in shame in *Paradise Bliss* is reprised by Cain's shameful flight in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God* (Fig. 62), and later by Moses's escape into the deserts of Midian after murdering the Egyptian, where we begin his story in the first Moses tapestry.[531] Parallels can also be drawn between Adam,

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[529] Keith Bodner, *An Ark on the Nile: The Beginning of the Book of Exodus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 95-96.
[530] Jerome, *Principal Works*, 145.
[531] In fact, Philo of Alexandria notes the motif of escaping the eye and justice of God throughout Genesis: "The bad man thinks that God is in a certain place, not surrounding it, but being surrounded by it. On which account also he thinks that he can conceal himself from him, as if God were without any prevailing reason

Abel, and Noah, all cultivators of the land (Fig. 63). We find the mirrored filial betrayals, curses, and exiles of Cain and Ham, and the recurrence of the satanic serpent in the staff of Moses when appearing before Pharaoh, now refigured as a symbol of God's might.

Fig. 64 The exiles of Adam and Eve (*Paradise Bliss*) and Cain (*Cain Flees the Wrath of God*).

Fig. 65 Adam (*Adam Cultivates the Earth*) and Noah (*Noah's Drunkenness*) tilling the land.

at a distance from that part of the world in which he has determined to lurk." Philo of Alexandria, *Works*, Book 4, http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book4.html (accessed 29 January 2024).

As previously mentioned, all three major protagonists have moments of succumbing to sin, two of which end in an exile (Adam and Moses), and two of which are shown in the tapestries to go through atonement (again, Adam and Moses, with Noah's being implied in *Noah's Drunkenness*). Some of the many other similarities include Adam and Noah's connection to animals as the ur-naturalists (also echoed through Abel, the first shepherd), Abel and Noah's worthy sacrifices, Moses and Cain's flights from punishment for murder, and the "righteous" versus "unrighteous" violence of *The Battle with the Amalekites* and *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*.

Furthermore, referring back to the underlying theme of princely virtues, all three patriarchs exhibit strong leadership, resolute faith, courage, resilience in the face of catastrophe, and humility before God as righteous yet flawed men. All three have episodes of direct contact with and commands from God, indicating their piety, proximity to God, and status as his chosen representatives on earth (much like a divine-right monarch). Both Adam and Noah are remembered as progenitors of nations, but Moses can also be considered a founder of a dynasty: he was the first leader of the Israelites out of Egypt, established the lineage of Judges, and designated an illustrious successor, Joshua. Further support for similarities in characterisation among the *Genesis* protagonists can be found in Calvin's *Institutes*. First, "Adam, Abel, and Noah, when tried with various temptations, neglecting the present, aspired with living faith and invincible hope to a better life." Second, "Adam, Abel, Noah…and others under the Law looked for the fulfilment of the divine promises not on the earth, but in heaven. Hence they termed this life an earthly pilgrimage, and desired to be buried in the land of Canaan, which was a figure of eternal happiness."[532] Third, "Adam, Abel, Noah…and the other patriarchs" had pious minds "enlightened in the

[532] Calvin, *Institutes*, 363.

knowledge of God, and, in a manner, linked to him…united to God by this illumination of the word."[533]

We also find suggestions of a cyclical reading of *Genesis* in Orzechowski's *ekphrasis*. For example, there is the aforementioned recurrence of the warning of punishment for sin at the hands of a "wrathful God" in the description of *Paradise Bliss* and the conclusion. As previously mentioned, Orzechowski bookends the *ekphrasis* with similar exhortations to the king, such that the entire text (and tapestry series) "rhymes." Both the introductory and concluding paragraphs recall the artistic quality of the tapestries ("the remarkable nature of the materials and artistry" and "the admirable art and sequence"), and both paragraphs refer to the creative vision of the patron ("the mind and innate majesty of the greatest king" and "the spirit and mind with which Sigismund Augustus has been endowed").

The most notable example in the *ekphrasis*, however, is the recurrence of Cain in his descriptions of the Noah subset. Regarding *The Moral Downfall of Mankind*, he writes that "the artist skillfully showed how criminal Cain's progeny were." For the next tapestry, *God Converses with Noah*, he refers back to this description: "The avenger of evil and protector of good appeared in His divine form, walking with Noah and telling him of the Flood, in the depths of which He wanted to bury the aforementioned criminals." Next, for *The Building of the Ark*, Orzechowski writes, "I will show you God, enraged at the progeny of Cain, as he gives the patriarch Noah instructions for the Ark." We return to Cain for *The Flood*, in which "you could see the shameful flight of Cain's progeny, a sign of their guilty consciences." In this same tapestry, he refers to the "godless progeny," using the same descriptor that Orzechowski used so frequently for Cain. Finally, even amidst the joy of

[533] Ibid., 368.

God Blesses Noah' Family, the red in the rainbow is compared to "fire, which never ends, showing us the eternal punishment awaiting the godless."[534] Thus, Orzechowski frames *Genesis* as a kind of ongoing battle between good and evil across the ages, between the "criminal" descendants of Cain, the cursed line, and the godly patriarchal line of Adam, Abel, Noah, and Moses.

On a very literal level, the *Genesis* tapestries can be read as a cycle simply by nature of their initial placement in the chambers. While they were separated into subsets by the divisions between rooms, they hung all around the rooms with no clear start or end point within those subsets. While it is reasonable to assume that the wedding night tour would have taken guests through the scriptural order (albeit with the Moses story out of sequence), one could just have easily started viewing the tapestries at any point during the narrative, depending on where one started in the room. Alternatively, viewers could contemplate the first and last tapestry in each sub-set together, as they would have hung next to each other. Finally, although the symbolic references between the tapestries will be considered during close readings in later chapters, the most obvious nod toward a cyclical narrative in the designs of the tapestries is in the semicircular composition of *Paradise Bliss*. As the overture to the entire story and one of the centrepieces, it is interesting that it presents the story of creation and the Fall in such a half-cyclical way, perhaps setting the scene for the series' cyclical mode of narration.

There are other examples of cyclical Old Testament storytelling in sixteenth-century art, although (as discussed in Chapter Two), it appears to have been the only example of its kind in tapestry in the first half of the century. For similar examples, we need only look to Raphael's Vatican frescoes (which include the same Old Testament

[534] Orzechowski, "Panegyricus," in *Arrasy*, 53-55.

stories as *Genesis*) or the Sistine Chapel. Moreover, in her study of Titian's Old Testament paintings for the Church of Santo Spirito in Isola (1542-1544), Madlyn Kahr interprets the artist's project in cyclical terms based on meta-thematic links between the paintings (in this case, the theme of sacrifice), iconographic rhymes, and exegetical evidence.[535]

Beyond the clues in the content and placement of the tapestries pointing toward a cyclical reading, there is considerable support for such an approach to the Genesis stories in hermeneutic literature. Since the writings of the Early Church Fathers, the Pentateuch had been understood as the first act in the cycle of covenant history, comprising the Noahic, Abrahamic, and Mosaic Covenants. The cycle continued through the stories of the later prophets (the Davidic and New Covenants) and culminated with Christ, the ultimate fulfiller of the covenant of mankind's salvation and redemption. In order to draw a direct line from Genesis to the gospels, the Fathers adopted a "doctrine of correction and fulfilment," in Jaroslav Pelikan's words. They argued that the promises made by God to the patriarchs (from Adam to David and subsequent prophets) prefigured the new covenant made through the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that each Old Testament covenant continued and modified its predecessor in teleological progression to the New Testament. As Christopher Hall explains:

> The fathers' understanding of the Scripture's overarching narrative of salvation can be understood as a symphonic approach. They were convinced that the music contained in the first movement—themes involving Adam, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Deborah, Hannah, David, Solomon, and so on—was also filled with precursors of the themes and rhythms heard in the second movement of the new covenant centred in Christ; both movements combined to form a symphony the fathers believed was composed by the Holy Spirit.[536]

[535] Kahr, "Titian," 193-205.
[536] Hall, "Moses," 383-386.

The *Genesis* series depicts two of the three pentateuchal covenants (Fig. 64): the Noahic ("I will establish my covenant with you, and all flesh shall be no more destroyed with the waters of a flood, neither shall there be from henceforth a flood to waste the earth," Gen 9:11) and Mosaic (If therefore you will hear my voice, and keep my covenant, you shall be my peculiar possession above all people: for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation. Those are the words thou shalt speak to the children of Israel," Ex 19:5-6). The former (Noahic) covenant is even referenced in the inscription of *God Blesses Noah's Family*: "God blesses Noah and his sons and shows them a rainbow in the sky as a sign of the eternal covenant with them."

However, through the story of Adam, the series presents another covenant, wherein God promises Adam life if he obeys his commands, and death if he disobeys and eats from the Tree. Calvin termed this event the "Covenant of Works," one of the three foundational covenants for his covenant theology as outlined in the *Institutes*. According to Calvin, the breaking of this covenant by Adam led to the five aforementioned biblical covenants, collectively termed the "Covenant of Grace."[537] Going on step further, it is possible to read the Cain and Abel tapestries through a covenantal lens, as God makes a covenant with Cain and his descendants upon assuring him that he will not be killed for his sin: "Whosoever shall kill Cain, shall be punished sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, that whosoever found him should not kill him" (Gen 4:15).

Given the absence of Abraham, the other "official" recipient of a covenant in the Pentateuch based on exegetical consensus, it is unlikely that the *Genesis* series was intended to be a direct representation of covenant history or of Calvin's covenant theology. However, as the recurrence, amendment, and reestablishment of covenants are one of the

[537] Calvin, *Institutes*, 362-364.

linchpins of the patristic interpretation of the Old Testament as a cycle, it is noteworthy that moments of covenant-making feature heavily in the tapestries: in the command not to eat the fruit in *Paradise Bliss*, in God's appearance to Cain in *Cain Flees the Wrath of God,* in *God Blesses Noah's Family*, and in the tapestry depicting the conveyance of the Ten Commandments. In the latter two cases, entire tapestries are dedicated to depicting a "covenant moment."

Lacking primary evidence from the side of the patron and the artists, there is no way of definitively proving that the tapestries were intended to evoke a cyclical pattern. This interpretation necessarily remains speculative, but the tapestries could easily have been interpreted thusly by a contemporary audience, based both on hermeneutic knowledge and the hangings' placements in the chambers. This reading does open up some important implications for the series' ideological claims. Specifically, it may suggest that the princely virtues repeated among the protagonists, with which Sigismund wanted to associate his own image, are immutable. Earthly conditions may wax and wane, but God's design for His chosen leaders remains the same throughout history. Mankind will continue to face calamities and chaos ad infinitum, and so leaders must learn from the example of godly men of the past to know how to weather the storm.

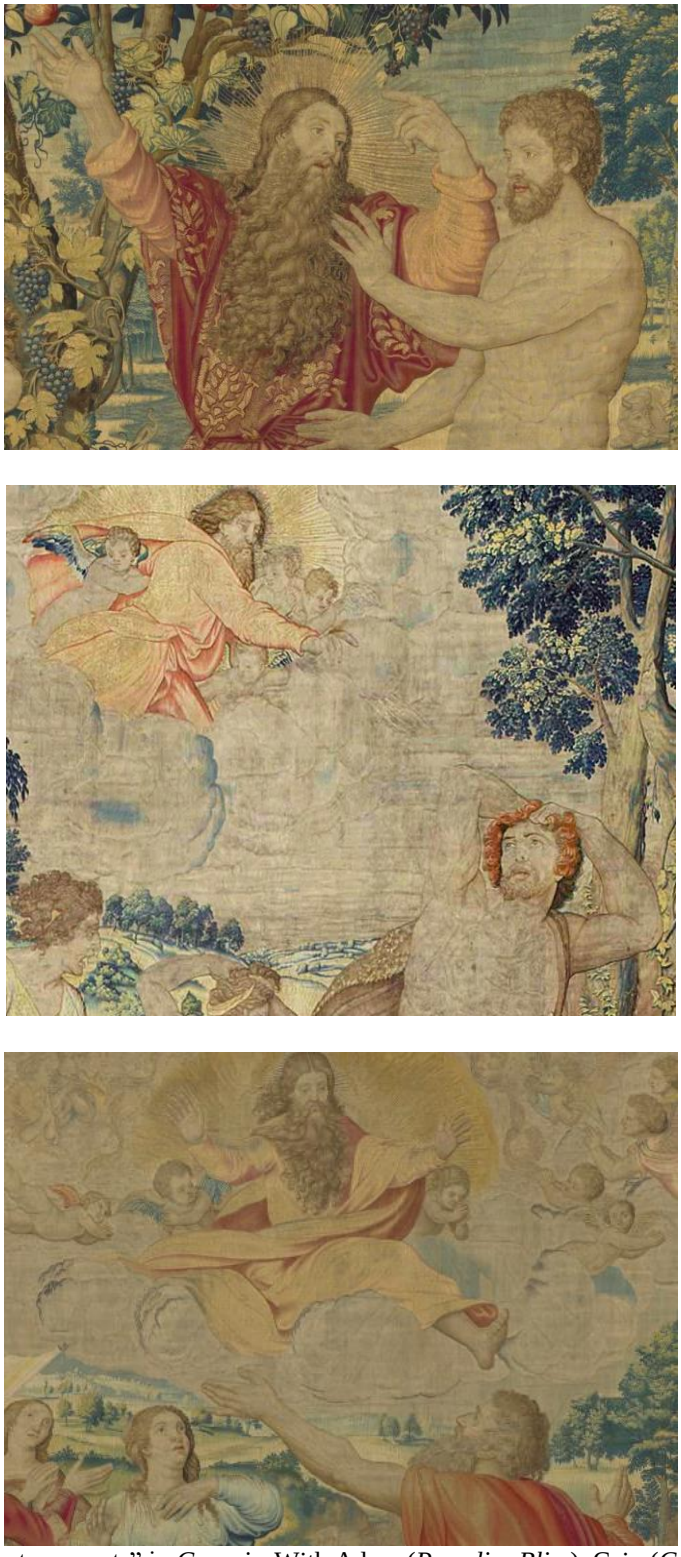

Fig. 66 Three “covenant moments” in *Genesis*: With Adam (*Paradise Bliss*), Cain (*Cain Flees the Wrath of God*), and Noah (*God Blesses Noah’s Family*).

Alternatively, or perhaps additionally, one can read the covenants of *Genesis* through a more secular lens, as a metaphor for the covenants made between kings and nobles. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the limited Polish monarchy, and

especially for Sigismund, whose *vivente rege* coronation was only accepted by the *szlachta* on the condition that he swear additional oaths to uphold the rights and privileges of the other Estates. Modrzewski does use the term "covenant" multiple times throughout *De Republica* in reference to princely oaths and alliances. Using historical examples, he warns the king never to break a domestic or international covenant, as the consequences may be a matter of life and death:

> He who sows discord among his sons or chooses favourites among them is not a true father….He, too, who harms his people, and pits one against the other for his own gains is not worthy to be called a lord or king…It is necessary to keep the faith [promises] with everyone in fairness, for otherwise the unity of the Republic cannot be maintained, although one must keep the faith not only among citizens, but with friends and enemies alike [i.e. outside the kingdom]...We hold in eternal memory the miserable example of Władysław [III], the king of Hungary, your uncle, o king! Who made a covenant with Murad [II], the Turkish king, and at the behest of Pope Eugene IV, broke it, bringing great harm upon himself and his kingdom. For while he had enjoyed successes in his battles with the Turks until that point, he was punished accordingly afterward. For although his army was sufficiently large and = powerful and was used to winning battles before, the king Himself died, for God, the architect of the covenant, wished to punish him.[538]

Later, Modrzewski refers to covenants in Book Three ("On War"), in the first section entitled, "All efforts should be made that war might be avoided." He discusses how "neighbouring countries and their rulers typically make covenants with each other" to keep the peace and form alliances." Interestingly, Modrzewski illustrates his point with pentateuchal examples:

> Such covenants are made not only between people of one religion or one faith, but with those of different faiths. The example of the holy fathers can show us this

[538] Modrzewski, *De Republica*, 134-135.

> when first Abraham and then Isaac made covenants with Abimelech [the Philistine king] and sealed them with an oath.[539]

Following Modrzewski's argumentation, we find that covenants, based on biblical examples, are a foundational part of righteous Christian kingship. This strengthens the interpretation of covenants in *Genesis* as a reminder of the unchanging model for kingship established with the patriarchs and continuing to Sigismund's day. In particular, covenants may represent the necessity for a ruler to keep his promises and seek peace, both with his own subjects and with foreign polities, with allies and adversaries, even across confessional lines.

5.7. Conclusion

When we consider the *Genesis* series as a whole, the primary themes that emerge are strong leadership, dynastic proliferation, the necessity of faith, divinely-bestowed wisdom, sound judgement, profound piety, justice, repentance for sin, trust in God against all odds, peace and stability amidst disaster, and a promise of salvation, purification, and renewal for the kingdom. Most of these can be found in the other existing biblical tapestries around the time of the commission, as described in Chapter Two. This suggests that Sigismund was drawing on similar formulae for princely virtues as rulers across Europe in an attempt to present himself as their peer, both in power and in morality. Like Charles V, Henry VIII, and other major patrons, Sigismund used Old Testament patriarchs to project an ideal of kingship in a turbulent and unstable time.

However, the patriarchs in the *Genesis* series and the motifs that the episodes draw out do seem to be cogent vehicles to reflect Sigismund's specific persona and ideological programme to a courtly audience. The characters represent the virtues that would have been

[539] Ibid., 304-305.

most expedient and logical for him to highlight. The potential references to political and religious issues facing Poland were covert enough not to cause controversy, yet comprehensible enough based on common hermeneutic knowledge for a learned audience to grasp.

Most crucially, the tapestries appear to be in close dialogue with established models of kingship in sixteenth-century Poland, perhaps best elucidated by Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski. In his chapter "On Kingship" in Book One of *De Republica*, Modrzewski lists the following as the core princely virtues: prudence in choosing one's company and didactic materials, temperance in matters of the flesh, justice in judgement over crimes, selflessness in putting the needs of the kingdom and its subjects over one's own, equality in dealing with all subjects and all regions of the kingdom, steadfastness in resolving conflicts and not sowing seeds of discord, piety in keeping and promoting the faith, generosity and fairness in giving each man what he is owed, and courage in willingness to die for one's country.[540] Reflections of most of these virtues can be found in the woven stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and Moses. Moreover, as discussed in this chapter and Chapter Three, Orzechowski centres much of his interpretation on princely virtues (and warnings of their inverses), especially piety, righteousness, peace, temperance, humility, courage, and wisdom. The cyclical nature of the narrative presentation of *Genesis* (and Orzechowski's account of it) serves to highlight these virtues and reinforce their immutability for rulers across the ages.

Arguably, one of the most important facets for a reading of *Genesis* through a princely lens is the meta-theme of lineage, paternity, and dynasty. Alongside the recurring virtues of the main characters, moral lessons of the episodes, and metaphorical motifs such

[540] Ibid., 139.

as husbandry, this emerges as one of the strongest threads tying the series together. On one hand, this allowed Sigismund to wield dynastic imagery, perhaps as an attempt to assuage concern about his own lack of progeny. On the other hand, by proxy of his patriarchal exemplars in the tapestries he commissioned, Sigismund could place himself within a truly illustrious lineage. Through them, he was able to present himself as a "most Christian prince," typified by proximity to God, divinely-ordained leadership, and the manifold virtues exhibited by the *Genesis* protagonists. Considering the tempestuous circumstances of his accession and early reign, the faith and courage of the patriarchs in their respective trials, as well as their successes in guiding their people to safety and salvation, would have been particularly pertinent.

In addition, the motif of faith traverses the stories of all of the *Genesis* protagonists. First and foremost, this should be understood in the spiritual sense as unwavering faith in God, both for the king and his people. Secondly, though, this can be read in the secular sense as the people's unwavering faith in the monarch, whose position over them has been divinely ordained and reflects the supremacy of God over the king himself. If this hierarchy of God, king, and subjects is maintained, and both the king and his people have faith in their rightful superiors, only then can an earthly kingdom flourish.

It is also important to note that several of the major themes found in the narrative echo those that emerged from our stylistic reading of *Genesis*, especially the order/chaos dichotomy and the role of the king in facilitating the spiritual growth of his subjects. Because of these parallels between style and narrative, we see an increasingly cohesive programme forming, one that reinforces itself on different levels of reading the artworks. From a reception perspective, the implication of this is vital: whether focusing on the visuals or story of *Genesis*, many of the most important messages for Sigismund's image-

creation and agenda would have been evident to the viewer. Neither style nor narrative contradict each other; rather, they support and underline the didactic content at each level.

However, there is one final layer of the close reading proposed in the Introduction that would have contributed to the overall *Genesis* project, and which had the potential to either bolster or destabilise the programme discussed thus far: the iconography, especially in the bodies and animals of the tapestries.