

A GLIMPSE OF OUR PAST

A Hidden Rib Found in Michelangelo Buonarroti's Fresco *The Creation of Adam*

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The fresco *The Creation of Adam* (1511), painted on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by the great genius of human anatomy Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), represents one of the most emblematic and best-known scenes in the world. This fresco illustrates a key passage from the Book of Genesis: the moment when God creates the first man, Adam. Since its completion, this work has been intensively studied by many scholars of art, and by several anatomists, who have pointed out signs of anatomical representations contained in the scene. However, there is still some uncertainty regarding this famous scene, especially in relation to its complete iconography. In an attempt to understand Michelangelo's purpose better regarding this emblematic scene, this article presents unpublished evidence that the artist could have concealed within the figure of Adam the anatomical image of a rib which, according to traditional Biblical accounts, is iconographically associated with the origin of Eve, Adam's companion. Curiously, this hidden rib in Adam's body figure could be related to the traditional view of the origin of the first humans expounded in the Jewish Kabbalah. Clin. Anat. 32:648–653, 2019. © 2019 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Key words: Michelangelo; Sistine Chapel; *The Creation of Adam*; Anatomy; Rib; Kabbalah

INTRODUCTION

The fresco *The Creation of Adam* (1511) by the Renaissance artist and genius of human anatomy, Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564), located on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome, Italy, is one of the best-known images in the world (Barreto and Oliveira, 2004; Blech and Doliner, 2008; Vasari, 2011). In the fresco, one can clearly observe the traditional Biblical narrative that describes the first human being [Adam] newly created, along with his Creator, God (Fig. 1). Thus, in this portrayal of Adam, Michelangelo is certainly alluding to *Genesis 1:26*:

And God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (Nelson, 1982).

Because it depicts the formation of the first human being, the fresco of Adam has been the subject of

numerous interpretations and analyses throughout history. Some of these analyses have demonstrated important mathematical properties in the composition of the characters within this fresco (De Campos et al., 2015a). In addition, the anatomical positions themselves and the configurations of both Adam and God have been interpreted in different ways by various

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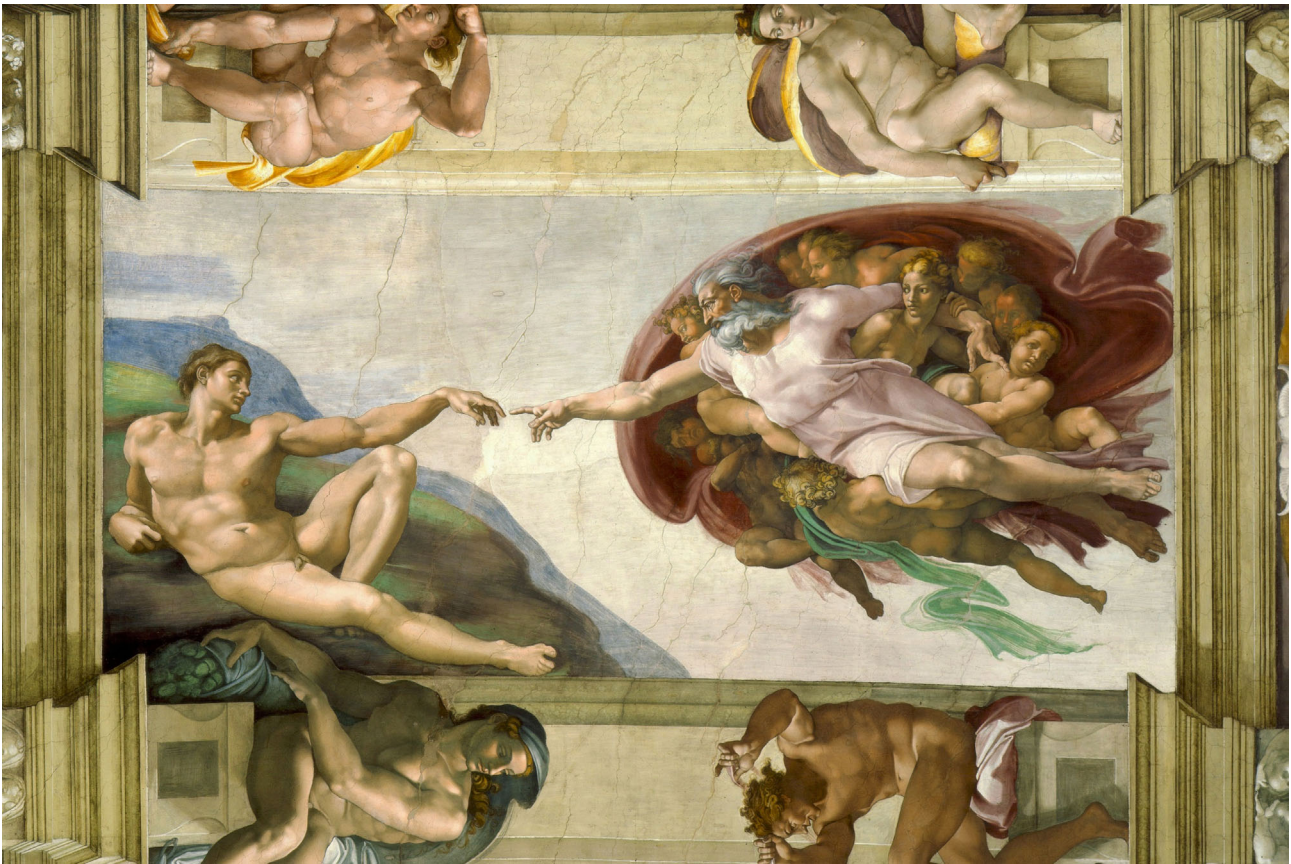


Fig. 1. *The Creation of Adam* fresco (1511). Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome (http://www.vatican.va/various/cappelle/sistina_vr/index.html). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

researchers. Interestingly, some of these interpretations have suggested that the figures of Adam and God are designed in the form of a placenta, or even a postpartum uterus and adjacent structures (Tranquilli et al., 2007; Di Bella et al., 2015).

In this context, perhaps the best-known interpretation is that provided in 1990 by Frank Meshberger. Meshberger suggests the mantle of God could represent a medial sagittal slice of the skull and the encephalon contained therein (Meshberger, 1990). However, such interpretations suggesting the depiction of anatomical structures within this scene remain tentative, mainly because the structures in question do not relate in any obvious way to the traditional Biblical narrative. The present article offers novel evidence to suggest that Michelangelo could have concealed the anatomy of a rib within the figure of Adam. According to traditional Biblical narratives, the rib is iconographically associated with the origin of Eve, *Adam's companion*. Moreover, as described below, this representation by the artist could be related to the traditional view of the origin of Adam and Eve expounded in the Jewish Kabbalah.

Analysis

In the fresco *The Creation of Adam*, Michelangelo represents God as an elderly bearded man stretching out his right hand toward the left index finger of Adam, who, in contrast to God, has his left hand extended. What Michelangelo represents between the fingers of Adam and God has been described as the transmission of divine energy from God to Adam, known as the *Spark of Divinity* [*Scintilla Divinitatis*] (Vasari, 2011). However, it is not only the left hand of Adam and the right of God that deserve attention in this fresco. As he reaches out his hand toward God, Adam leaves his left forearm resting on his knee; and it is from this position that an outline [*area*] is clearly formed on the left side of Adam that resembles the anatomy of the head of a rib (Fig. 2).

DISCUSSION

Historically, according to Catholic tradition, God created the first woman, Eve, the mother of us all,

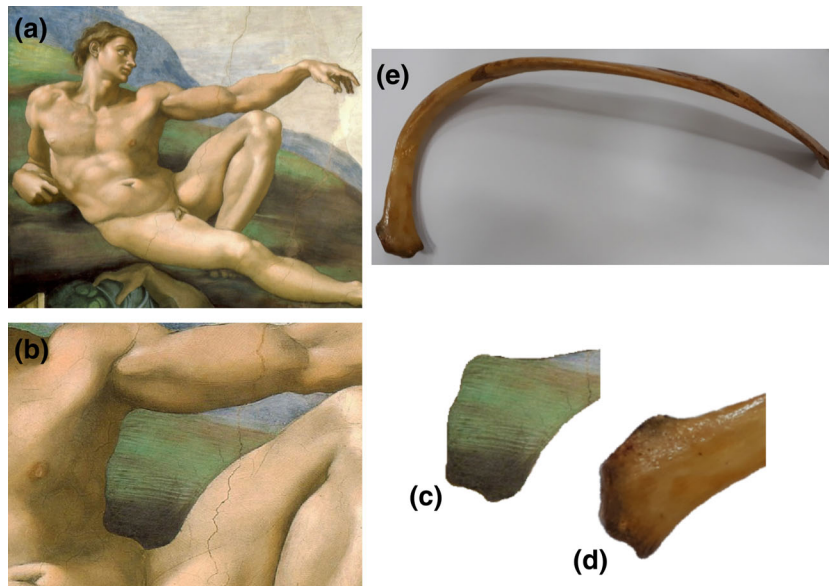


Fig. 2. (a) Detail from the fresco *The Creation of Adam* (1511), focusing on Adam's left side (b). Note that the area occupied (c) by the left side of Adam's body is very similar to the shape of the head (d) of a left rib (e). Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome (http://www.vatican.va/various/cappelle/sistina_vr/index.html). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

from Adam's rib (Blech and Doliner, 2008), as follows (*Genesis 2:21–22*):

And the Lord God caused a heavy sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed the flesh in that place; And from the rib that the Lord God took from man, He formed a woman, and brought her to Adam (Nelson, 1982).

However, in contrast to the Catholic tradition, which uses the term "rib," Jewish rabbinic scholars, on the basis of their knowledge of the mystical and esoteric tradition of Judaism—Kabbalah—asserted that Eve had not been created from Adam's rib alone, because the original word in the classical Biblical Hebrew text was *ha-tzela*, which means the *side*, not the rib (Crowley, 2000; Blech and Doliner, 2008). The Jewish rabbinical sages explained that Eve would not have been created from the head of Adam, so she could not become arrogant and consider herself superior to her companion, or his feet, so she could not feel oppressed. Eve would have been created from Adam's *side*, so the two would be equal companions in life (Blech and Doliner, 2008). In this context, we have a relationship with the description found in *Genesis 2:24*:

Therefore, man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and both shall be one flesh (Nelson, 1982).

Michelangelo was certainly acquainted with all the teachings and representations of Eve's emergence

from the Adam's rib according to Catholic tradition, so much so that the artist also represented *The Creation of Eve* (c. 1511) alongside Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The specialized literature (Vasari, 2011) describes some similarities between Michelangelo's frescoes *The Creation of Eve* and *The Creation of Adam* and works by medieval artists such as Giotto di Bondone (1266–1337) and Lorenzo Ghiberti (1381–1455). Nevertheless, in the fresco showing Eve's creation, the artist no longer faithfully followed Catholic tradition. In this scene, Michelangelo represented Eve connected to Adam's whole left side, not just a specific point (i.e., *the rib*) (Fig. 3) (Blech and Doliner, 2008). Thus, this representation is consistent with the traditional Kabbalistic doctrines of the Jewish rabbinical sages, who claim that Eve was created from the Adam's *flank/side*, so that the two would be equal companions (Blech and Doliner, 2008).

Hence, some explanations arise that, drawing on specialized references, could provide clues suggesting that Michelangelo actually concealed a rib in the fresco of Adam, alluding to the Jewish Kabbalah's traditional view of the origin of the first humans. We can see:

1. There is evidence that Michelangelo disagreed radically with many ideas in the Catholic tradition at the time, especially those of Pope Julius II, who commissioned the artist's work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Blech and Doliner, 2008). For this reason, Michelangelo often concealed subjects in his works that extolled other religious doctrines, especially those related to the Jewish Kabbalah, since he was also an adept of the Jewish traditions (Blech and Doliner, 2008; De Campos et al., 2016; De Campos and Da Costa Oliveira, 2018).

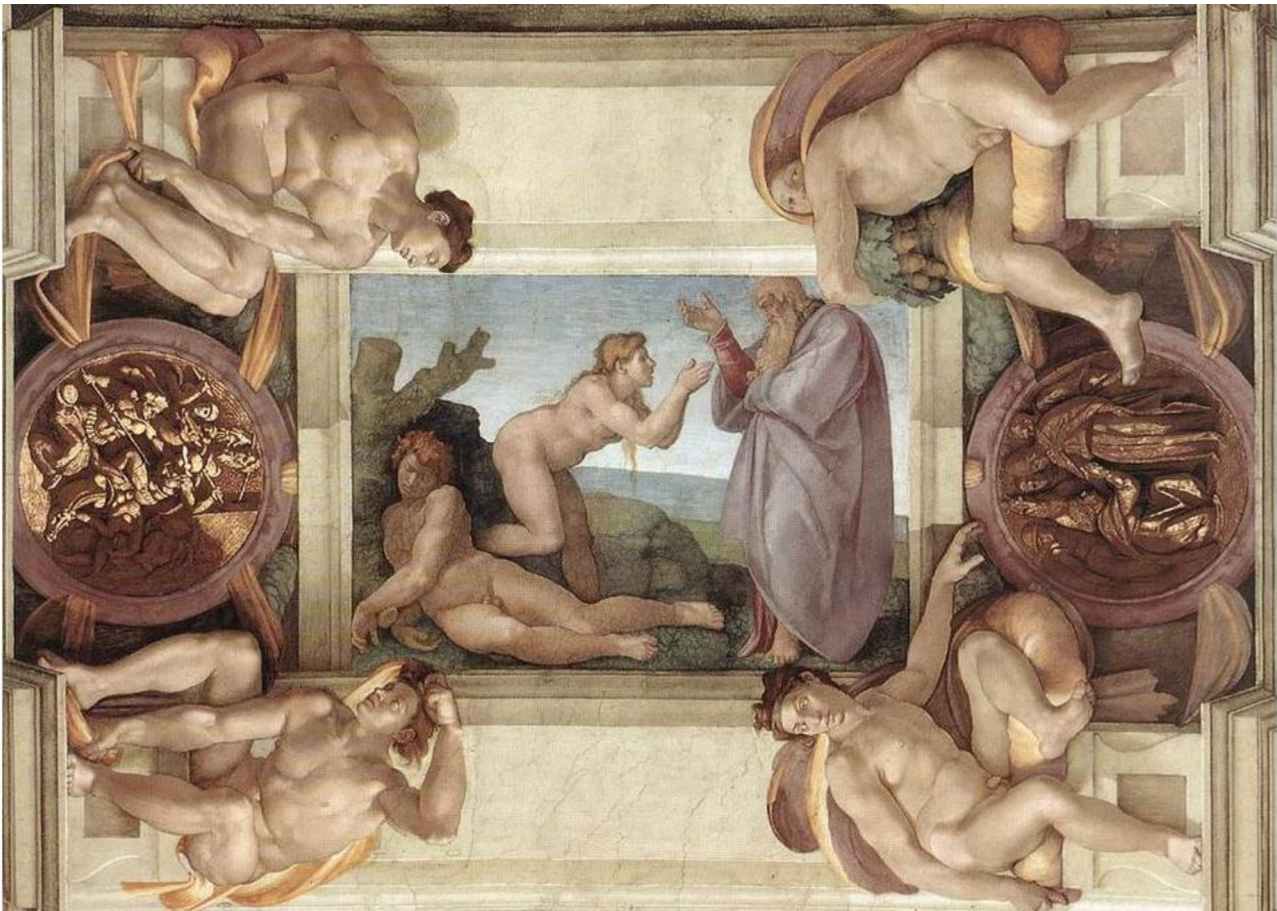


Fig. 3. *The Creation of Eve* fresco (c. 1511). Note that Michelangelo did not represent Eve emerging exclusively from a specific point (*Adam's rib*). Eve is connected with virtually the whole of Adam's left side. Michelangelo Buonarroti, Sistine Chapel, Vatican, Rome (http://www.vatican.va/various/cappelle/sistina_vr/index.html). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

2. Rabbinical descriptions based on Kabbalah point out that Adam was androgynous: *man on the right side and woman on the left*. God divided Adam vertically into two halves, distinguishing man/woman; therefore, woman has been associated with the left side throughout history. Thus, according to the teachings of the Jewish Kabbalah, Adam and Eve were born simultaneously, side by side, linked like Siamese twins (Cooper, 1997; Crowley, 2000; Chevallier and Gheerbrant, 2016).
3. The Catholic tradition describes the rib as the point of origin of Eve (Blech and Doliner, 2008), so it is plausible that it could also represent Eve herself. Therefore, following the Catholic tradition, any artist under the orders of the Pope Julius II/Catholic Church would be unlikely to represent Eve on the side of *The Creation of Adam* as though both were being created simultaneously; the Catholic tradition did not consider this to be the case. However, by representing Adam alongside a rib at the time of his own creation, Michelangelo could be alluding to the view contained in the traditional Jewish Kabbalah, which views Adam and Eve as Siamese siblings (Cooper, 1997), i.e., born side by side. Note that the rib-like shape in the fresco of Adam is formed from practically the whole of Adam's left side [*historically the feminine side* (Chevallier and Gheerbrant, 2016)]; and this is fully consistent with the fresco of Eve, where Michelangelo places her on the left side of Adam, completely connected to him (Fig. 3).
4. Being both profoundly knowledgeable about and a follower of the teachings of the Jewish Kabbalah (De Campos and Da Costa Oliveira, 2018), Michelangelo would surely incorporate this rabbinical interpretation of Adam and Eve being formed side by side. However, as the fresco is located in the most sacred of Catholic chapels, this would have had to be disguised; it would have been completely at odds with the Catholic tradition, which did not recognize Adam and Eve as being created at the same instant.

5. During the period when *The Creation of Adam* was created, very few people knew anything about human anatomy, especially that of a rib. However, for those profoundly acquainted with both human anatomy and the Jewish Kabbalah, as Michelangelo was (Eknoyan, 2000; Blech and Doliner, 2008; Suk and Tamargo, 2010; Lydiatt and Bucher, 2011; De Campos et al., 2015a, 2015b; De Campos et al., 2016; De Campos et al., 2017; De Campos and Da Costa Oliveira, 2018), this could in fact be something evident and possible. Moreover, even if Pope Julius II and his inner circle had perceived the figure of a rib on Adam's left side, they might have chosen to tolerate this representation by the artist, just as they tolerated the various naked characters represented by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (Blech and Doliner, 2008; Vasari, 2011).
6. Specialists have pointed out that the Jewish Kabbalah, which includes the mystical and esoteric tradition of Judaism, claims to have its origin in the secrets that the angels transmitted to Adam (Blech and Doliner, 2008). Furthermore, according to the Kabbalah and traditional Jewish teachings, Adam means *the earthly man created by God with the earth* [*in Hebrew: Adamah = plowed earth/earth of men*] (Chevallier and Gheerbrant, 2016). Thus, the words for Adam and earth are associated, as they represent the form in which Adam would have been created by God; that is, created from the earth. In this context, the Kabbalah further considers that Adam was created from the center of the earth, on *Mount Zion* [*in Jerusalem*], considered the *navel of the world* (Chevallier and Gheerbrant, 2016). When we look at Michelangelo's Adam, it is easy to see the allusion to the *navel of the world* described in the Kabbalah, since the artist also represents him being created on top of a hill/mount (Fig. 1).

CONCLUSION

The facts of Michelangelo's history indicate the likelihood that he surreptitiously inserted the anatomy of a rib into his depiction of Adam. There is an incontrovertible evidence that the shape of the head of a rib fits perfectly into Adam's left side, and innumerable references (Blech and Doliner, 2008; De Campos et al., 2016; De Campos et al., 2017; De Campos and Da Costa Oliveira, 2018) show that while being contracted to represent/extol the traditional figures venerated by the Catholic tradition, Michelangelo often inserted symbols that reflected and exalted his own beliefs, especially those concerning Jewish doctrine (Blech and Doliner, 2008). This could have been a reflection of his intellectual development. As an adolescent, and under the tutelage of the Medici family at the then *bottega* in Florence/Italy, Michelangelo learned the concepts of the Jewish Kabbalah from his masters, *Marsilio Ficino* and *Pico della Mirandola*, both of whom were followers and scholars of the Jewish traditions (Blech and Doliner, 2008; De Campos and Da Costa Oliveira, 2018).

In addition, Blech and Doliner (2008) describe how symbolic images used by the artists of the 15th and 16th centuries, including Michelangelo, were considerably influenced not only by Greco-Roman mythology but also by classical esoteric traditions derived from Jewish beliefs, especially the Kabbalah. In view of this historical context of Michelangelo's work, and from all the iconographic evidence alluding to the Biblical narratives of Adam and Eve, it is at least plausible that the artist purposely designed the outline of Adam to incorporate the anatomy of a rib. From this perspective, one of the traditional teachings of the Jewish Kabbalah [*which describes Adam and Eve being born side by side, or simultaneously created*] can be seen as reaffirmed on the ceiling of the holiest of Catholic chapels.

"So God created humankind in his own image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them."

Genesis 1:27

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