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Painting the World's Christ: Tanner, Hybridity, and the Blood of the Holy Land

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Abstract:

Henry Ossawa Tanner's global vision of Christ circa 1900 projected an ideal of hybridity that embodied the artist's personal resistance not only to racial stereotypes but also to racial thinking as such.

Painting the World's Christ: Tanner, Hybridity, and the Blood of the Holy Land

by Alan C. Braddock

In 1899, Henry Ossawa Tanner painted *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus* (fig. 1), based on a story from the Gospel of John in which Christ tells a Jewish Pharisee of miraculous visionary powers available to those who are born again. By signing the painting "H. O. Tanner, Jerusalem, 1899," the artist touted his firsthand knowledge of Palestine, where he spent eleven months on two separate trips between 1897 and 1899. The *Nicodemus* is one of several paintings with biblical subjects that Tanner produced around 1900 after expatriating himself from the United States. Frustrated by pervasive racial discrimination on account of his African ancestry, Tanner left Jim Crow America in 1894 to live in France for the rest of his life, except for occasional family visits to Philadelphia and artistic expeditions to Palestine and North Africa.[1]



Fig. 1, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, 1899. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Joseph E. Temple Fund [\[larger image\]](#)

By 1900, Tanner had become an international success—exhibiting regularly at the Paris Salon, winning awards, and attracting more critical praise than many American artists, including his former teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Thomas Eakins. In 1897, Tanner's *The Resurrection of Lazarus* (fig. 2) was exhibited to great acclaim at the Salon, awarded a medal, and purchased by the French government for its Luxembourg Gallery of contemporary art. Expatriation in Europe actually enhanced Tanner's artistic reputation in America during these years, for he exhibited often in New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia. In 1900 the *Nicodemus* was purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy and awarded the prestigious Lippincott Prize. Yet it was only in the European art world and in biblical subject matter that Tanner found what he called "a perfect race democracy." [2]



Fig. 2, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1896. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée d'Orsay, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY [\[larger image\]](#)

Tanner's exodus from the United States and his religious background as the son of a prominent African Methodist Episcopal bishop (Benjamin Tucker Tanner) have led art historians frequently to interpret his biblical paintings as oblique sermons or allegories about the historical plight of African Americans. As Sharon Patton has observed regarding the biblical paintings, "Tanner's works are like the sermons of African-American preachers ... His religious scenes or landscapes sustained his cultural identity and religious training."^[3] More specifically, Dewey Mosby finds in the *Nicodemus*, with its nighttime setting and mysterious lighting, an allusion to clandestine religious worship by slaves as well as certain post-emancipation devotional practices among American blacks.^[4] Similarly, Mosby reads the *Lazarus* as a fictive reworking of emancipation itself, with Christ standing in for Lincoln as the redeemer of souls in bondage.^[5] Given Tanner's newfound professional success abroad at the turn of the century, it is tempting to see a broader resonance between the artist's own life and his interest in the biblical theme of resurrection, as if the painter sensed that his career had been born again through his passage to Europe and Palestine.

Reading Tanner's biblical paintings in terms of African-American identity and struggle has allowed art historians to find continuity between his scenes of the Holy Land and earlier genre pictures such as *The Banjo Lesson* (fig. 3) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894, Collection of William H. and Camille O. Cosby). Unlike the later biblical works, these genre scenes explicitly and sympathetically depicted black life in the United States and offered a pointed critique of prevailing racial stereotypes there. For legitimate and comprehensible reasons, such genre paintings have figured prominently in scholarship on Tanner dedicated to canonizing him as the fountainhead of a black or African-American art historical tradition. That process of canonization was already under way during the first half of the twentieth century, notably in the influential writings of Alain Locke, who praised Tanner's early black genre pictures while slighting the biblical paintings for being too European and racially unspecific.^[6] Locke summarized the artist's career in the following terms:



Fig. 3, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893. Oil on canvas. Hampton, Virginia, Hampton University Museum [\[larger image\]](#)

Tanner, who as one of the outstanding pupils of Thomas Eakins, should have become the pathbreaker in an art documenting Negro life (who, indeed, started his career with intimate folk studies like *The Banjo Lesson*) remained in Europe, except for occasional family and sales visits, to absorb, brilliantly but futilely, a lapsing French style.^[7]

Recent scholarship that downplays the importance of Tanner's biblical scenes or interprets them exclusively in terms of African-American identity and struggle basically reinvents Locke's bias by neglecting their more radical achievement: the displacement and deconstruction of race itself. One indication of that achievement emerges in the diversity of complexions and physiognomies populating the *Lazarus*, a work that illustrates the broader "race democracy" Tanner sought, not just outside the boundaries of a segregated United States but also beyond the confines of black American genre painting. Regardless of ancestry, the various depicted witnesses in the *Lazarus* unite in wonder at the miracle performed by Christ, whose light facial complexion, dark hair, and dark hands project an ambiguous racial median or mixture amid the complex ethnographic array of the Holy Land. In other words, Tanner's biblical pictures may not allegorize African-American identity so much as offer a utopian Christian vision of *world* community to which he thought the United States ought to aspire.

The present article focuses precisely upon Tanner's ambiguous racial construction of Christ circa 1900, a topic overlooked in previous scholarship on the artist but one having significant consequences for our historical understanding of his work and more broadly for how we interpret American art and identity from an international postcolonial perspective. Put simply, I argue that Tanner and his biblical paintings at the turn of the twentieth century—especially the *Nicodemus* and others depicting Christ as a figure of universality—offered a critique not simply of racism, but of "race" itself as an epistemological category.^[8] In that respect, Tanner's work offers an important international model for de-colonizing art by interrogating race at a moment when the dominant culture in the United States was deeply invested in segregation and difference. Those investments, of course, were articulated most famously in the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896, allowing

individual states to establish "separate but equal" public facilities based on racial difference. Such institutionalized segregation prompted W. E. B. Du Bois to identify the "color-line" as the "problem of the twentieth century."^[9]

For Tanner, however, the problem was not simply one of crossing or negotiating the "color-line" in painting but rather how to put that line, and the very idea of race, under erasure by highlighting the elusiveness—and therefore the universality—of Christ's identity. What makes Tanner's case especially interesting is the relationship that obtained between his pictures and his person, seen here in a photograph of around 1900, when he was about 40 years old (fig. 4). Tanner was a relatively light-skinned man whose complexion and physiognomy did not conform to stereotypical conceptions of blackness, but rather prompted a variety of (often overlapping) racial identifications, including "mulatto," "Latin," and even "Aryan." In the eyes of many contemporaries, Tanner *and* his work were complex hybrids that resisted clear racial definition, in a manner akin to the universality of Christ and the demography of the Holy Land. My purpose here is to examine the visual and historical evidence of that resistance by closely reading a selection of Tanner's paintings in relation to various writings by contemporary critics and by the artist himself.



Fig. 4, Frederick Gutekunst, *Portrait of Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 1907. Washington, D.C., Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, 1850-1978 (bulk 1890-1920), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

At the same time, it will be necessary to consider ways in which Tanner's *corpus* also paradoxically embodied contemporary forces of Western colonialism. Despite posing a challenge to racial thinking *tout court*, the artist's biblical project participated obliquely in a broader wave of Christian and Zionist intervention in Palestine circa 1900. At that time, many Protestant Americans saw themselves in pre-millennial terms as the new chosen people destined to erect God's kingdom on Earth after the restoration of Jews *en masse* to the Holy Land.^[10] Although Tanner's specific views regarding Zionism are uncertain, his work emphatically privileged Judeo-Christian themes. Like many American Protestants in the Holy Land, Tanner took practically no artistic interest in the living Moslem inhabitants of Palestine, suggesting that he considered them to be largely irrelevant to the region's sacred geography. Biblical history, with its archaeological residue and its promise for future redemption, was what really mattered to most modern American pilgrims and Tanner appears to have been no exception. As literature historian Hilton Obenzinger has observed

in a recent book on "Holy Land Mania" during the nineteenth century, "actual travel to Palestine allowed Americans to contemplate biblical narratives at their source in order to reimagine—and even to reenact—religio-national myths, allowing them ultimately to displace the biblical Holy Land with the American New Jerusalem."^[11] Tanner, the spiritually engaged son of a Protestant bishop, certainly was drawn to the Holy Land for many of the same reasons that attracted thousands of American tourists and missionaries of the period: a Christian sense of entitlement mixed with nationalist desire. The timing of Tanner's expeditions to Palestine—not long after the appearance of influential Zionist manifestoes by William Blackstone (1891) and Theodor Herzl (1896), not to mention the rise of American imperial power under President William McKinley (1897-1901)—further underscores the need to explore such historical issues in relation to his work.^[12]

Nevertheless, it is also crucial to recognize that Tanner's racial hybridity, stylistic internationalism, and expatriate status militate against an interpretation which collapses him too neatly into the dominant strain of late nineteenth-century American Christian colonialism. Instead, Tanner must be understood more dialectically as participating in, but also inflecting and actively modifying, Protestant discourse on the Holy Land. As I argue below, his pictorial constructions of Christ circa 1900 transcended mere nationalism—just as they resisted the straitjacket of race—in favor of a more global vision.

Wanamaker Missions

Tanner's exhibition successes in the United States during the early 1890s attracted considerable attention among prominent African Americans—including Du Bois and Booker T. Washington—as well as several progressive white philanthropists who were interested in promoting black education and cultural achievement. One such philanthropist was Robert C. Ogden, a business partner of the Philadelphia department store magnate John Wanamaker. Ogden helped arrange an exhibition of Tanner's *The Bagpipe Lesson* (1892-93, Hampton University Museum, Virginia) at the department store in 1894, initiating a period of influential Ogden-Wanamaker patronage of the artist that lasted the better part of a decade.^[13]

In 1897, Rodman Wanamaker, then acting as a European import/export agent for his father John, visited Tanner's Paris studio to see the *Lazarus* shortly after its purchase by the French government.^[14] At that time, Tanner had not yet visited Palestine, but Rodman admired the painting's authentic sense of "Orientalism" in depicting the Holy Land and recommended that the artist "go there every two or three years, at least, to keep in touch with the Oriental spirit."^[15] Rodman already had convinced his own father to make a pilgrimage there for six months in 1896, including stops at the Tomb of the Holy Sepulchre and the Beirut mission of his own Presbyterian Church, to which the elder Wanamaker made a generous donation.^[16] Shortly thereafter, between January and June 1897, Tanner undertook his first of two artistic expeditions to the Holy Land with funding from Rodman Wanamaker. In addition to Jerusalem, Tanner saw Cairo, Port Said, Jaffa, Jericho, the Dead Sea, and Alexandria—an itinerary that included key sites, or *topoi*, in the sacred geography of modern tourism in Palestine.^[17]

In the Wanamaker worldview, practices of art collecting, philanthropy, and Protestant Presbyterian belief intertwined in a global enterprise that promoted the moral progress of

American society hand-in-hand with the family business interests. As part of that enterprise, the Wanamakers also sponsored ethnological collecting expeditions focused on Native American culture in the western United States between 1900 and 1913. During those years, both Native American artifacts and biblical paintings frequently served as object lessons in Wanamaker department store displays, blurring the lines between commerce, education, and ethnography in ways that privileged the modern perspective of urban middle-class Christian consumers.[18] As John Davis and other historians have observed, such Protestant enterprise in the Holy Land constituted an eastern front in the increasingly imperial reach of Manifest Destiny well into the twentieth century: the Wild West and biblical East functioned as twin or mirror images of a vanishing frontier in need of material and spiritual salvation.[19] Tanner's orientalist excursions to the Holy Land thus complemented the Wanamakers' occidental expeditions. As a Protestant painter from Philadelphia with African ancestry, academic training, and a strong desire to succeed both economically and spiritually, Tanner was an appropriate emissary of Wanamaker-funded artistic philanthropy in the Holy Land.

Tanner arranged his second expedition, from October 1898 to March 1899, to coincide with an internationally heralded visit to Palestine by the German emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II. As the artist later wrote, "It seemed to me that this might be a great pageant, or that there might be incidents not easily to calculate upon that might arise, which would give a chance for a very interesting picture." [20] The ostensible purpose of Wilhelm's visit was to dedicate the new Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Jerusalem, which the Kaiser viewed as launching a new period of German imperial influence throughout the Middle East. As historian Paul Charles Merkley has noted, the occasion also gave rise to fervent hopes among many Zionists—including Christians as well as Jews—that the Emperor would proclaim himself Protector of the Jews in Jerusalem and help bring about the restoration of Eretz Israel. [21] That did not happen, but Wilhelm did attempt to negotiate with authorities of the Ottoman Empire (the nominal rulers of Palestine) for increased Jewish immigration to the Holy Land. The Kaiser's real motives mainly had to do with establishing his own imperial foothold in the Middle East and diverting Jewish immigration away from Germany in the aftermath of Russian pogroms. Nevertheless, for many pre-millennialist Protestants on the eve of the twentieth century, the significance of Wilhelm's visit and efforts in behalf of Jews took on a biblical significance, for it seemed to promise the impending return of Christ. For example, Merkley quotes the Anglo-German missionary William Hechler (a Protestant ally of Jewish Zionist leader Theodor Herzl) as saying, just prior to the Kaiser's arrival in Palestine, "Now we await the visit of the German Emperor to the Holy Land ... But maybe what we will have is the privilege of welcoming Jesus, Who has promised that He would come again ... Many signs are multiplying around us, announcing the Coming in a very brief time." [22] Although not as explicit or intense as Hechler's statement, Tanner's hopeful expectations of "a great pageant" and even "incidents not easily to calculate upon that might arise" hint at a similar sense of pre-millennial anticipation.

Nicodemus and the Complexion of Christ

Encouraged by the 1897 Salon triumph of his *Lazarus* and its purchase by the French government, Tanner decided while in Jerusalem in 1899 to paint *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, a work that proved equally successful. In addition to winning the Lippincott Prize and being purchased by the Pennsylvania Academy, *Nicodemus* recapitulated the *Lazarus* in a broadly

iconographic sense by addressing the theme of resurrection or rebirth. As told in the Gospel of John:

There was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews: the same came to Jesus by night, and said unto him, Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him. Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.[23]

Looking closely at the *Nicodemus*, we see that Tanner depicted Jesus with unconventionally dark skin, especially in the figure's left hand, which extends in a gesture at once elocutionary and beckoning. With his black beard, moustache, and dark brown eyes, Jesus provides a stark visual contrast to the elderly Nicodemus, whose hair, beard, and skin echo the cool gray colors of the architectural surfaces surrounding him. Tanner further accentuated the darkness of Christ's features through a vivid contrast between them and the white drapery worn by the Savior under his brown cloak. Unlike Nicodemus, the figure of Jesus has been illuminated by no fewer than three light sources: the moonlight, an implied lamp glowing warmly orange beneath the foreground stairs, and a mysterious inner light emanating from Christ's own breast. Despite this profusion of lights, however, the Savior's face and beard remain obscure.

Similarly darkened, enigmatic figures of Christ appear in other works by Tanner at the turn of the twentieth century, such as *The Savior* (fig. 5) and *Christ at the Home of Mary and Martha* (1905, The Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh). With their long dark hair and uncertain features veiled in shadows, Tanner's depictions of Jesus departed noticeably from those by James Tissot, the French academic painter whose famous and copiously illustrated book *La vie de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ* of 1896-97 (English translation, *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ*, 1899) established the dominant transatlantic mode at the time (fig. 6).[24] Tissot's travels to the Holy Land in 1885, 1889, and 1896 secured his reputation as the foremost biblical archaeologist among painters, a fact that in turn promoted a prodigious market for his works and earned him a fortune.[25] In *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ*, a profusion of authenticating Palestinian landscapes, architectural details, and local human "types" served to naturalize Tissot's essentially Victorian vision of Christ, whose light-skinned Anglo-Saxon appearance contrasted sharply with the sinister, stereotypically hook-nosed Jewish figures also pictured therein (as well as with some of the dark-haired Apostles).[26] One contemporary reviewer praised Tissot's Christ for his "apartness," his "luminous" appearance, "an immaculateness strangely touching," "incandescence," and "a certain awfulness of light and whiteness"—terms that certainly encouraged many Northern Europeans (and Euro-Americans) to interpret the Savior racially in their own image.[27]



Fig. 5, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Savior*, ca. 1900-1905. Oil on canvas mounted to plywood. Washington, D.C, Smithsonian American Art Museum / Art Resource, N.Y. [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 6, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, *Baptism of Jesus Christ*, 1886-1894. Watercolor. Brooklyn Museum of Art, Purchased by Public Subscription [\[larger image\]](#)

Tanner knew and undoubtedly admired Tissot's *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ*, but he diverged from the French painter's example by constructing a visibly darker Christ in the *Nicodemus* and other works circa 1900.^[28] It might be tempting here to think that Tanner, an artist with African ancestry, deliberately set out to present a "black" Christ as an anti-racist gesture akin to those detected by many art historians in his earlier genre paintings like *The Banjo Lesson*. Assertions of Christ's blackness or "Negro" identity, after all, were not rare in African-American religious discourse of the period. For example, in 1898 a minister named Henry McNeal Turner declared the following in one of his sermons:

Every race of people since time began, who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or carvings, or by any other form or figure, have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destiny was symbolized by themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that he resembles God as much as any other people?^[29]

Speculation about the blackness of Christ and his biblical ancestors also appeared in publications such as *Jesus Christ Had Negro Blood in His Veins: The Wonder of the Twentieth Century* (1901) by an author named W. L. Hunter as well as *The Color of Solomon—What?* (1895), written by Tanner's father, Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner.^[30] In 1875, another author named Kersey Graves averred, "There is as much evidence that the Christian Savior was a black man, or at least a dark man, as there is of his being the son of the Virgin Mary, or that he once lived and moved upon the earth."^[31]

And yet, the visual evidence in Tanner's *Nicodemus* does not really support an interpretation of Christ as distinctly "black," since the face of the savior here looks too generic and obscure to accommodate any specific racial reading. Though certainly "dark" in the vague sense articulated by Graves, Tanner's Jesus lacks the common ethnographic signifiers of "blackness," "whiteness," or "Jewishness" circulating at the time.^[32] The preponderance of shadows and conflicting light sources in the *Nicodemus* even look deliberately calculated by the artist to obfuscate the figure's appearance. Cool lavender moonlight above, reflected on Christ's forehead and left cheek, competes with the warm orange glow of a lamp below, illuminating his right cheek and breast, creating not just an element of mystery but also illegibility regarding skin color. Such effects of illegibility and invisibility aptly interpret the gospel passage in question, which states one "cannot see the kingdom of God" without being born again. In other words, Tanner's obscure and racially unspecific Christ functions less as a representation than as an enticing vehicle of salvation, through which the beholder may imagine the holy kingdom. Only after embracing God and experiencing spiritual rebirth through a leap of faith will the beholder see Christ in his plenitude, the precise nature of which Tanner strategically left unclear. Until making that leap, the beholder remains confronted with a beckoning enigma.

Significantly, Tanner recorded a statement about the Savior's enigmatic identity when he commented obliquely on turn-of-the-century debates regarding the historical Jesus. In one of a series of illustrated short articles on the "Mothers of the Bible" that he produced for *Ladies Home Journal* in 1902-1903, Tanner wrote the following about the young Christ:

The physical characteristics of the child Jesus will always remain a point of discussion. No artist has ever produced a type, nor ever will, that has in it all that the varying minds of all time will acknowledge as complete. It was my chance in Jerusalem to run across a little Yemenite Jew. Where could a better type be found than this swarthy child of Arabia, of purest Jewish blood—nurtured in the same land, under the same sun, and never neither he nor his ancestors, having quitted its (at times) inhospitable shores.^[33]

This statement accompanied an illustration reproducing a lost painting by Tanner that showed the figure of Mary with the young Jesus seated in the background, barely visible in the corner of a dimly lit room—another shadowy representation of the Savior. More telling are Tanner's words, which deserve careful consideration, for at first glance they seem inconsistent. On the one hand, he identified the young Christ with the "type" of a Yemenite Jew that he encountered in Jerusalem, a "swarthy child of Arabia" whose "purest Jewish blood" ostensibly remained unchanged through the ages. Like many American Protestants who visited the Holy Land, Tanner viewed contemporary Jewish inhabitants of Palestine as

living windows onto the biblical past. Anthropologists identify this perspective—a commonplace in Western colonialism—as the "ethnographic present."^[34] At the same time, however, Tanner conceded that "No artist has ever produced a type, nor ever will" that would qualify as complete, not even his own picture based on a Yemenite model. In other words, despite his evident excitement about finding a model that seemed to him close ethnographically to the historical Jesus, Tanner ultimately doubted the prospect of unearthing Christ's true identity in an archaeological or racial sense.

Moreover, by consistently shrouding the figure of Jesus in shadows and physiognomic vagueness, Tanner's paintings circa 1900 registered such doubts, effectively repudiating the identification of Jesus with a single type, whether "black," "white," "Jewish," or otherwise. Art historian David Morgan has noted similar doubts expressed by contemporary Protestant ministers in the United States regarding the possibility of depicting Jesus in his spiritual and ethnographic totality. Such concerns led some of them to abandon the notion of a specific, archaeologically accurate type in favor of a more universal, heterogeneous model, described by one minister as "THE WORLD'S CHRIST."^[35] For Tanner, the racial identity of Jesus was similarly elusive and unrepresentable. In light of Christ's universal spiritual importance to humanity, race seemed beside the point. As the artist observed in 1924, "My efforts have been to not only put the Biblical incident in the original setting ... but at the same time give the human touch 'which makes the whole world kin' and which ever remains the same."^[36] Christ's worldly, universal power to unite humanity ultimately mattered more to the artist than ethnographic specificity.

Renan and the Blood of the Holy Land

By expressing such views, Tanner aligned himself with ideas espoused by the eminent French biblical historian and philosopher Ernest Renan (1823-1892), whose writings the artist reportedly had read.^[37] In the influential book *Life of Jesus*, published in several editions beginning in 1863, Renan wrote the following about the region in northern Palestine where Christ is believed to have conducted his ministry:

The population of Galilee, as the name itself indicates, was very mixed. This province reckoned among its inhabitants, in the time of Jesus, many who were not Jews,—Phoenicians, Syrians, Arabs, and even Greeks. Conversions to Judaism were not rare in mixed countries like this. It is therefore impossible to raise any question of race here, or to investigate what blood flowed in the veins of him who has most of all contributed to efface the distinctions of blood in humanity.^[38]

In the eyes of Tanner's admiring contemporaries, the artist *and* his work partook of a complex, interracial "blood" that still seemed to flow freely and timelessly through the veins of the Holy Land. Indeed, the elusive complexity of Tanner's racial identity became a set piece in turn-of-the-century art criticism. Reviewers frequently noted his light-skinned "mulatto" or "quadroon" features, but they also said that "hints of African descent" (as one writer called them) were mixed with other ethnic traits, including "Latin," "Greek," and even "Saxon."^[39] In a 1908 article for *Alexander's Magazine*, an African-American periodical dedicated to the educational theories of Booker T. Washington, critic William Lester observed the following:

It is a singularly mixed strain of blood that flows in the artist's veins; for in his personality there is little or no trace nor suggestion of African ancestry. His clear, gray eyes are of the Aryan type; his complexion is a clear white, bronzed by the sun in an active outdoor life. His features are of the classic Roman mold, his carriage, attire and manner that of the modern Parisian. His thick, dark, curly hair, brushed carelessly back from a fair, broad brow, suggests the southern Latin races rather than types of tropical origin. ... Mr. Tanner is a notable example of the genius of American art, a brilliant product of the New World's creative and heterogeneous civilization.[40]

Another critic, Vance Thompson, writing in a 1900 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, broached the artistic relevance of Tanner's racial undecidability:

A strange personage, this young mulatto—the product of Philadelphia and the Latin Quarter and Bethlehem—who is destined, I like to think, to give the world a new conception, at once reverent, critical and visionary, of the scenes of the Bible.[41]

In keeping with this critical "new conception," others praised Tanner for basing his biblical characters not on one single racial type but rather on what another reviewer called "world-types." [42] Consequently, Tanner produced works that went "beyond the limitations of race and country" [43] and that were "above all racial distinctions." [44] Tanner's physical body and artistic corpus thus became more or less interchangeable: both were perceived as universal, interracial, and worldly, not unlike Christ and the Holy Land.

Given this recurring critical celebration of Tanner's universality, both in personal and pictorial terms, it is instructive to read the artist's own words on the subject of racial diversity and equality in Paris, where he felt he had found "true race democracy." In the Lester article cited above, Tanner was quoted praising the social environment in French art studios in words that echoed the critical terms then circulating about him and his work:

In Paris ... no one regards me curiously. I am simply 'M. Tanner, an American artist.' Nobody knows nor cares what was the complexion of my forbears. I live and work there on terms of absolute social equality. Questions of race or color are not considered—a man's professional skill and social qualities are fairly and ungrudgingly recognized. No one who had not carefully observed the art world of Paris could have any clear idea of its broad and deep race admixture. When I began to study under [Jean-Joseph Benjamin-] Constant I found in the studios men of all nations and races under the sun—Muscovites and Tartars; Arabs and Japanese; Hindoos and Mongolians; Africans and South Sea Islanders—all working earnestly and harmoniously with students of the Caucasian race. It is so now, in greater degree and on even broader lines." [45]

Judging from this description, the Parisian studios, with their "broad and deep race admixture," might be said to resemble Renan's Galilee and the pluralistic crowd of onlookers in Tanner's *Lazarus*—"men of all nations and races" who coexist "earnestly and harmoniously," unconcerned about "questions of race or color." Although Tanner did not explicitly make this connection, the art studios of Paris and the sacred geography of the Holy Land constituted for him roughly analogous spaces of heterogeneity and universal equality.

A more personally revealing statement about racial heterogeneity appears in one of Tanner's private letters. In 1914, an American art critic named Eunice Tietjens sent Tanner a draft of a recent review she had written in which she praised his work but also offered her sympathy for the many trials and obstacles he had faced as a "negro" artist.[46] Writing back to Tietjens, Tanner expressed his appreciation, but also registered the following objection regarding her racial identification of him as a Negro:

Now am I a Negro? Does not the 3/4 of English blood in my veins, which when it flowed in 'pure' Anglo-Saxon men and which has done in the past effective and distinguished work in the U.S.—does this not count for anything? Does the 1/4 or 1/8 of 'pure' Negro blood in my veins count for all? I believe it, the Negro blood counts and counts to my advantage—though it has caused me at times a life of great humiliation and sorrow[. But] that it is the source of all my talents (if I have any) I do not believe, any more than I believe it all comes from my English ancestors.[47]

Tanner's statement here is extraordinary for the way in which it pays tribute to the coexistence of "English" and "Negro" blood in his veins, crediting both as sources of his talent despite the "humiliation and sorrow" ostensibly caused by the latter. As his mother had been born a slave, the granddaughter of a white plantation owner in Virginia, Tanner was keenly aware that he and his family embodied the complex racial legacy of America's "peculiar institution," especially since his relatively light skin led many people to call him a "mulatto" or "quadroon." [48] Although the mathematical "blood" ratio that Tanner used to describe his ancestry seems to privilege "Anglo-Saxon" over "Negro" (3/4 versus 1/4 or 1/8), his interpretation nevertheless balanced the equation in terms of creative influence. Moreover, while his reference to blood fractions reflects a nineteenth-century understanding of genetics—that is, one not yet informed by turn-of-the-century critiques of racial formalism by anthropologist Franz Boas or the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's genetic research—his placement of the word "pure" in quotations suggests an intuitive, modern awareness of the problematic nature of such racial calculations.[49] Indeed, the overall tone of Tanner's statement is one of subtle, mocking disdain for assumptions about the validity of permanent, distinct racial types or notions that ancestry determines competence. His statement approaches that of Renan, who concluded (regarding Christ) it was "impossible to raise any question of race here." In keeping with the Christian tradition of monogenism, or the belief in the unity of the human species, Tanner felt that superficial distinctions of race were far less important than talent.[50]

Hybridity

On another level, Tanner's letter to Tietjens constitutes a prescient and personal articulation, *avant la lettre*, of the critical concept of *hybridity*, a term now central to the lexicon of postcolonial theory and criticism. Although rooted etymologically in ancient concepts of animal husbandry that were often used by nineteenth-century segregationists to decry racial "miscegenation," hybridity today carries rather different connotations.[51] In postcolonial theory, hybridity refers to the overlapping or mingling of identities in a colonial encounter, wherein the presumed distinction between colonizer and colonized becomes unclear, resulting in a productive, enduring process of creolization having both corporeal and cultural implications. As described by Bill Ashcroft and the editors of *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, hybridity "is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather on their continual and mutual

development."^[52] Homi Bhabha inflects and mobilizes this idea by highlighting the disruptive, liberating potential of hybridity, describing it as an "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" that prevents them from "settling into primordial polarities."^[53] According to Bhabha's psychoanalytic and deconstructive model, "Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority—its rules of recognition."^[54] To put it another way, colonial authority inevitably unmakes itself by enacting discriminatory codes that prompt, and even presuppose, their own transgression, revealing the colonizer and colonized to be culturally and even biologically indistinguishable.

Tanner's refusal to be distinctly identified as either Anglo-Saxon or Negro (or even "Mulatto" for that matter), preferring to align himself with both simultaneously, aptly illustrates Bhabha's notion of "interstitial passage." Indeed, Tanner's very existence as the great-grandson of a black slave and a white planter certainly bespeaks the inevitable breakdown in the colonial "rules of recognition" governing racial identity and social difference in Jim Crow America.^[55] To borrow the title of a recent book by Werner Sollors on interracial literature, Tanner was "neither white nor black yet both" and as such he and his art flew in the face of segregationist laws and principles.^[56] After all, the apartheid colonial logic of segregation in the United States, institutionalized nationally in the Supreme Court's *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, depended upon a clear system of recognizable differences between "white" and "black." Consequently, any lack of clarity produced instability in the system. The various "one-drop" blood rules buttressing racial segregation in turn-of-the-century America exemplified the fitful, fetishistic legal measures taken in an effort to erase hybridity and preserve an appearance of clear distinctions.^[57] While Tanner's calculation of racial blood fractions reflects his awareness, and even a certain acceptance, of the logic of one-drop laws, his mocking disdain for notions of purity cuts against the grain by signaling a nascent recognition of their fallaciousness.

In terms of broader socio-cultural impact, the positive critical reception of Tanner's biblical paintings—especially the recurring praise of their universality and transcendence of racial distinctions—indicates that the artist's hybrid, worldly visions of Christ and the biblical Holy Land were having an effect in the art world circa 1900. His work seems to have opened a space for critical discussion of progressive social values and the end of racial thinking, at least until Alain Locke and other later writers closed the door on such discourse in the interests of a narrower race consciousness and solidarity. Admittedly, Tanner's expatriation and self-exile might be said to illustrate the success of American segregation in repressing progressive discourse and excising troublesome racial anomalies, thereby maintaining the colonial economy of recognition and difference described by Bhabha. On the other hand, the artist's considerable international fame, extending as it did far into the sacred precincts of high culture in the United States, indicates a significant gap in that colonial economy. In keeping with Bhabha's nuanced sense of the ambivalence of colonialism, Tanner's hybridity, couched in Christian ideology, at once closed and opened doors for him. The positive recovery and affirmation of Tanner's hybridity only seems imaginable now, at a moment marked by rapid globalization, dispersal of cultures, and the bewildering intersection of ancestries. While globalization clearly has a downside—manifested in fractured communities, gross disparities of economic power, commodification of difference, etc.—it also offers more optimistic prospects, as suggested by Bill Ashcroft's sense of "mutual

development" of independent cultural traditions. Similarly, the postcolonial theorist Arjun Appadurai contends that "Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization," but rather produces a new transnational system "based on heterogeneous units" in which the imagination is "a staging ground for action."^[58] Following Appadurai, the present article has sought to take such action by wresting Tanner from previous historical homogenization as a narrowly "black" or "American" artist in order to imagine (reimagine) him in more heterogeneous, global terms.

Mary and the Reflexive Invisibility of Christ

In 1900, Tanner painted a work simply entitled *Mary* (fig. 7) showing the mother of Christ pensively watching over her newborn son, who rests quietly on the floor before her, oddly concealed under a blanket, with a halo hovering above his invisible head. Scholars have struggled to comprehend the iconography of this peculiar composition, but Mary's thoughtful contemplation of the shrouded child undoubtedly foreshadows his Passion and Entombment. As art historian Daniel Burke has observed, Tanner's *Mary* participates, albeit idiosyncratically, in a centuries-old Christian tradition of the Mater Dolorosa, or sorrowful mother, somberly anticipating her son's sacrifice in behalf of humanity.^[59] In keeping with that tradition, the blanket covering Christ evokes the burial shroud in which his body would later be wrapped after the Crucifixion. Burke further accounts for the unusual disposition of the Christ child here by suggesting that the artist drew inspiration from an 1885 work entitled *Madonna of the Rose* (fig. 8) by Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, an important French academic painter whose general influence Tanner publicly acknowledged in 1900.^[60] Burke's comparison is quite appropriate, as both pictures conceal the face and head of the baby Jesus and belong to the Mater Dolorosa tradition. Yet Tanner also creatively departed from Dagnan-Bouveret in several respects, most notably by concealing the body of the Christ child *completely*.



Fig. 7, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Mary*, 1900. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia, LaSalle University Art Museum, Purchased with funds donated by Regan and Regina Henry [\[larger image\]](#)



Fig. 8, Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, *Madonna of the Rose*, 1885. Oil on canvas. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund [\[larger image\]](#)

Regardless of specific iconographic and compositional sources, Tanner's *Mary* relates conceptually to other works by the artist already discussed that obfuscate the figure of Christ, although it obviously goes a step farther by making him invisible. In doing so, the picture also participated in a broader, late nineteenth-century artistic preoccupation with what I will call the reflexive invisibility of Christ—a rather theatrical technique in which the Savior's pictorial absence paradoxically encourages the viewer to imagine his corporeal and spiritual presence. An example of this phenomenon occurs in Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Golgotha* (also known as *Consummatum Est*, 1867, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), showing the Crucifixion only indirectly through shadows cast in the foreground of the picture, in front of the otherwise invisible crosses at Calvary.^[61] A similar approach occurs in James Tissot's *What Our Saviour Saw from the Cross*, one of several representations of the Crucifixion in the artist's *Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ*.^[62] The image in question shows Apostles, Roman centurions, and a throng of other onlookers staring up from below, directly toward the beholder, who thus fictively occupies the position of Christ on the cross. A lost painting by Tanner entitled *And He Vanished Out of Their Sight* (ca. 1898, location unknown) provides still another example in this vein, depicting not the Crucifixion but rather Christ's mysterious post-Crucifixion apparition and disappearance at the supper table of two disciples.^[63] The reflexive visual and metaphorical structure of these pictures, especially the one by Tissot, encourages identification between the beholder and Christ in order to inspire faith while implicitly projecting the *artist's* sense of identification as well. Given Tanner's status as an exile of American racism whose hybridity and artistic internationalism intersected with contemporary perceptions of the Holy Land, it is tempting to think that he viewed such a pictorial structure in autobiographical terms, as an opportunity for self-projection in the role of sacrificial martyr.

While the latter suggestion may well be true, it is also impossible to prove without external documentary evidence in the form of a corroborating statement by the artist. Moreover, the pictorial presence of the Christ child in *Mary* (albeit invisible under the shroud) problematizes this painting's relationship to those by Gérôme and Tissot, in which the artist-beholder palpably occupies the position of the Savior on the cross. Nevertheless, Tanner's *Mary* does invite autobiographical interpretation for a number of other reasons.

First of all, the draped, invisible body of the Christ child functions as a blank screen, onto which the artist-beholder could reflexively project his own identity. In addition, Tanner modeled the figure of Christ's mother after his new Swedish-American bride, Jessie Macauley Olssen (fig. 9), whom he had just married in 1899.[64] This fact establishes an especially rich structure of autobiographical relations in the picture that once again underscores Tanner's strong identification with the story of Christ. From his twin position as painter and husband of "Mary," Tanner could imagine himself occupying not only the role of the Christ child, but also that of either Joseph or God the Father, standing in a parental relation to the supine infant.



Fig. 9, Portrait of Jessie Macauley Tanner (Mrs. Henry O. Tanner), ca. 1899. Unidentified photographer. Washington, D.C, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, 1850-1978 (bulk 1890-1920), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [\[larger image\]](#)

In other words, the artist's recent marriage and selection of his wife to model for the Virgin renders the pictorial structure of *Mary* overdetermined by concerns about paternity and maternity, wherein biblical and personal identities intersected. The painting thus fictively contemplates both the infancy of Christ and the prospective progeny of the artist. A few years later, in 1903, the Tanners produced their only child, a son named Jesse, but when this picture was painted they were not yet parents. In light of the visual and verbal assertions of racial undecideability discussed earlier in relation to both Tanner and Jesus, as well as the artist's marriage to a woman of Nordic ancestry, the painting of *Mary* also implicitly ponders race as an enigma on two levels: iconographically regarding Christ and personally regarding the artist's own future offspring. That is, by treating the appearance of Jesus as literally an open question in *Mary*, Tanner powerfully underscored the elusiveness of race, both in Christ and in his own child, both of which he viewed in universal terms. The implicit autobiographical structure of *Mary* invites consideration of yet another historical nuance. If the invisible Christ child functioned reflexively as a surrogate for Tanner's own future offspring, the infant's placement under a funereal shroud suggests that the artist was concerned about its potential "martyrdom," perhaps as a sacrificial lamb to the forces of racism and intolerance.[65]

Christian Colonialism

Mary was one of the four pictures that Tanner provided to *Ladies Home Journal* in 1902 and

1903 to illustrate his series of short articles on "The Mothers of the Bible."^[66] By taking a special interest in biblical maternity, the artist contributed to yet another broad discourse endemic to American Protestantism at the time. As noted by Milette Shamir and other cultural historians, figures of domesticity and motherhood proliferated in American Protestant literary representations of the Holy Land during the late nineteenth century.^[67] From Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* to the travel writings of ministers such as Henry White Warren to the matriarchal organization of the "American Colony" in Jerusalem, recurring tropes of biblical maternity effectively rendered the Holy Land as a reflexive crucible of United States national identity. Warren's 1874 travelogue provides a case in point:

[The Holy Land] is the first country where I have felt at home. Yet I have been in no country that is so unlike my own. Somehow this seems as if I had lived here long ago in my half-forgotten youth, or possibly in some ante-natal condition, dimly remembered. As I try to clear away the mists, bring forward the distant, and make present what seems prehistoric, I find myself at my mother's side and my early childhood renewed. Now I see why this strange country seems so natural. ... [It is] funded as a part of my undying property.^[68]

Such expressions of intimate connection to the Holy Land, articulated through the maternal body, clearly reinforced a pre-millennial sense of Christian colonial entitlement. More specifically, as Shamir observes, American Protestants figured the Holy Land "as a feminized, biologized point of origin ... as a mother, who offers the assurance of a common past and the promise of continuity as remedies for the racial and ethnic anxieties of the progressive era. ... From this perspective, interest in the Holy Land had little or nothing to do with the realities of Ottoman Palestine and everything to do with a sense of social crisis and a longing for stability in the United States itself."^[69] At a time when mass immigration from Europe and Asia was changing the demographic and religious face of America, many Protestants from the United States found solace in what they took to be the immutability of the Holy Land—the site of Genesis—whose living inhabitants ostensibly were no different from those of biblical times. According to this view, the ancient blood of the Holy Land was intact and Americans were its chosen inheritors, its descendents.

As we have seen, Tanner shared aspects of such Protestant ideology. For example, his fascination with a Yemenite model, articulated in rhetoric of the ethnographic present, reveals the artist's perception of the Holy Land as a timeless space so permeated with its biblical past as to be beyond historical evolution. In addition, his disregard for Palestine's living adherents to Islam, not to mention all traces of Ottoman or Western modernity there, relates to blind spots that Shamir identified in the American Protestant perspective.^[70] Even though Tanner effaced racial distinctions through a pictorial celebration of Christ's universality, he nevertheless privileged a Judeo-Christian, as opposed to Islamic, religious perspective. In other words, whereas his hybrid World Christ imagery anticipated postcolonial thinking vis-à-vis race, his relatively narrow pictorial emphasis on the biblical past echoed contemporary Christian colonialism in Palestine.

As a Protestant painter of biblical scenes who was married to a woman of Swedish ancestry, Tanner also had more than a little in common with members of the American Colony in Jerusalem. That Protestant evangelical commune had been founded by a group of Americans and Swedes led by Anna Larsson Spafford and her husband Horatio,

Presbyterians who left Chicago in 1881 with a group of fifty-five followers to establish their own version of the Promised Land in Jerusalem.[71] Embracing the nineteenth-century fringe theory of "Anglo-Israelism," which claimed that Nordic blood originated in the ten lost tribes of Israel, the Spaffords viewed themselves as belonging to a purer branch of the original family of humankind than the Jews. We have no evidence that Tanner knew the Spaffords or shared their particular messianic views, but his 1914 letter to art critic Eunice Tietjens voiced a measure of pride in his own Nordic, "Anglo-Saxon" blood that was not entirely inconsistent with theirs.

Conclusion: Christ in a Higher Key

As if to underscore a sense of that Nordic pride, by 1910 Tanner's vision of Christ had become considerably "whiter" than his turn-of-the-century depictions. In a work entitled *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* (fig. 10), for example, the youthful Jesus stands next to Mary reading a scroll, his golden brown hair and brightly illuminated cheek, tinged with pink, looking quite different from the darker, more obscure figure of the Savior in his *Nicodemus* of 1899. Dressed in luminous white clothing, this young Christ brings to mind Tissot's *Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ*. In addition to modeling the Virgin Mary once again on his Swedish-American wife, Tanner here based the figure of Jesus on his son Jesse, then seven or eight years old.[72] The artist's choice of wife and son as models here would seem to reinforce the observations made above regarding the autobiographical structure of his earlier painting entitled *Mary*. As a statement about education, though, *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* dramatically reverses the terms of Tanner's *Banjo Lesson* by substituting a feminized culture of writing for the emphatically masculine scene of oral instruction in that 1893 work.



Fig. 10, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* (*Christ Learning to Read*), 1910. Oil on canvas. Dallas Museum of Art [\[larger image\]](#)

That conceptual reversal accompanied a stylistic revision by the artist, evident in the palette of violets, blues, and greens that were brighter and cooler than the colors of his earlier mode. Art historian Dewey Mosby has suggested the influence of El Greco's Baroque mysticism in this change of palette, which emerged after Tanner traveled to Spain in 1902. [73] Tanner and his contemporaries have told a different story, however. When the young American painter Hale Woodruff visited him in France in 1928 and queried him about his

artistic influences, Tanner replied "Rembrandt, yes. ... Rubens, maybe ... but El Greco—I'm not so sure. El Greco was perhaps too close to Italian art, which during his time, idealized man according to prevailing aesthetic concepts and this reduced man to a kind of pictorial anonymity."^[74] Elsewhere, Tanner and his reviewers acknowledged the importance of modern French academic artists such as Dagnan-Bouveret, his former Académie Julian instructors Jean-Joseph Benjamin-Constant and Jean Paul Laurens, and even the Postimpressionists.^[75] According to the critic Clara MacChesney, writing in 1913, "Mr. Tanner says that the ultimate effect of the new movement in art will be a good one. It will lift up the color scheme, induce greater individuality and freedom, and afford a looser and more open and spontaneous handling of pigments. He believes in acquiring new ideas from all schools and methods. Post-impressionism is discarding all laws and is anarchistic in its beliefs. The pendulum now swings far to the extreme, but the ultimate end will be a good one."^[76]

Most, but not all, contemporary critics praised Tanner's new style. Rilla Evelyn Jackman noted rather ambivalently that "Many of his pictures are positively weird, so unusual is his color and lighting. Some of his later canvases are much lighter in color than the earlier ones, but all are rich, and the tonal quality is pleasing."^[77] The American critic Eunice Tietjens, writing in the 1914 review mentioned earlier, felt there was "a certain danger to Mr. Tanner" in such a "higher key" and "cold palette," which "does not seem temperamentally suited to him." In the view of Tietjens, "The cold end of the spectrum, the violets, blues and cold greens, belong naturally to the Anglo-Saxon." She thought Tanner "more at home in the warmer tonalities" and among "more warm-blooded peoples, beginning with the Latins."^[78] Tietjens was not the only art critic to notice the "higher key" in Tanner's paintings after 1910, but none had so emphatically asserted its racial connotations or its ostensible "danger."^[79] Unlike other critics that had largely praised Tanner's work for embodying universality regarding race and spirituality, Tietjens expressed reservations about the artist's apparent "Anglo-Saxon" direction.

Reading Tietjens's criticism understandably made Tanner bristle, for it amounted to another form of racial stereotyping, this time articulated in terms of style rather than genre or iconography. Just as Alain Locke and others would soon lament Tanner's abandonment of explicit "Negro" subject matter, Eunice Tietjens called into question his shift away from an allegedly natural "Negro" palette. No wonder he responded sharply and directly by writing the letter to Tietjens in which he drew attention to his "Anglo-Saxon" blood. Tanner did so not to repudiate his African ancestry, but rather to challenge the idea that one or the other should dictate his palette or the manner in which he portrayed Christ. Nor is it surprising that Tanner also made the following statement in his letter to the critic: "I suppose according to the distorted way things are seen in the States my blond curly headed little boy would also be a 'negro.'"^[80] Far from being a kind of race traitor (as Tietjens implied), Tanner here upheld the interstitial freedom of hybridity by once again resisting the confines of racial thinking, with its convenient yet simplistic types. The lighter-skinned Jesus in *Christ and His Mother Reading the Scriptures* does signal a change in the painter's approach to depicting the Savior, but this undoubtedly was prompted mainly by fatherly pride in the actual appearance of his son, along with an awareness of modern artistic experiments in color.^[81] If anything, the light complexion of his son confirmed for Tanner the elusiveness of race

and the arbitrariness of color, which in turn underscored the universality of Christ regardless of his appearance in pictures.

Tanner recognized that the real "danger" confronting him was American racism, which continued to categorize him—and now potentially his son—as second-class citizens, based on absurd "blood" distinctions that chafed against the artist's Christian worldview. That worldview was selective in its own way, for it privileged a single religious tradition increasingly associated with colonial forms of intervention in Palestine. And yet, if Tanner shared with American Protestantism a fascination with the sacred geography of Christian belief, his interest in the hybridity of the Holy Land diverged from narrow forms of nationalism. The blood that flowed through his veins, like the paint on his canvases, had a more international character.

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Notes

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[1] For recent discussions of Tanner's biblical paintings, including the *Nicodemus*, see Marcus C. Bruce, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Spiritual Biography* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), pp. 115-39; Dewey F. Mosby, *Henry Ossawa Tanner* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1991), pp. 146-99; Jennifer Harper, "The Early Religious Paintings of Henry Ossawa Tanner: A Study of the Influences of Church, Family, and Era," *American Art* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1992), pp. 68-85.

[2] Tanner quoted in William R. Lester, "Henry O. Tanner, Exile for Art's Sake," *Alexander's Magazine* 7, no. 2 (15 December 1908), p. 73. For Tanner's exhibition history and awards, see Mosby 1991, pp. 34-53.

[3] Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 101.

[4] Mosby 1991, pp. 168-69.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 136.

[6] Misgivings about Tanner's turn from "Negro" genre pictures were voiced as early as 1902. According to the prominent African-American educator W. S. Scarborough, "When 'The Banjo Lesson' appeared many of the friends of the race sincerely hoped that a portrayer of Negro life by a Negro artist had arisen indeed. They hoped, too, that the treatment of race subjects by him would serve to counterbalance so much that has made the race only a laughing-stock subject for those artists who see nothing in it but the most extravagantly

absurd and grotesque. But this was not to be." W. S. Scarborough, "Henry Ossian [sic] Tanner," *Southern Workman* 31, no. 12 (December 1902), pp. 665-66.

[7] Alain Locke, *The Negro in Art* (1940, reprint Chicago: Afro-Am Press, 1969), p. 9.

[8] For a brief discussion of Tanner and universality in the context of a broad survey of other artists, see Kymberly N. Pinder, "Our Father, God; Our Brother, Christ; or are we bastard kin?": Images of Christ in African American Painting," *African American Review* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1997), pp. 229-30. Pinder does not broach Tanner's personal and pictorial hybridity as potentially destabilizing "race" itself.

[9] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; reprint, New York: Vintage, New American Library, 1990), p. 221. Du Bois originally made this statement in an address to the first Pan-African Conference of 1900. On Plessy, see Brook Thomas, "Plessy v. Ferguson and the Literary Imagination," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 9, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 1997), pp. 45-64.

[10] For historical background on American ideas about Zionism and Palestine in the nineteenth century, see the introduction to Lawrence Davidson, *America's Palestine: Popular and Official Perceptions from Balfour to Israeli Statehood* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), pp. 1-39; Milete Shamir, "Our Jerusalem: Americans in the Holy Land and Protestant Narratives of National Entitlement," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (March 2003), pp. 29-60; Paul Charles Merkley, *The Politics of Christian Zionism 1891-1948* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1998), pp. 54-74.

[11] Hilton Obenzinger, *American Palestine: Melville, Twain, and the Holy Land Mania* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 5.

[12] The Blackstone Memorial of 1891 and Theodor Herzl's *Der Judenstaat* of 1896 are discussed by Merkley 1998, pp. 3-10, 59-61, 65-72.

[13] On the Wanamakers, see William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon, 1993). Ogden's and Rodman Wanamaker's support of Tanner, including funding the artist's Palestine expeditions, is discussed in Bruce 2002, pp. 40-41, 68, 74-75, 100, 102, 115, 119, 138; Mosby 1991, pp. 96, 136-38, 149.

[14] For information about Rodman Wanamaker's activities with the Wanamaker business and as an administrator of the American Art Association in Paris, where he lived from 1888 to 1898, see Joseph H. Appel, *The Business Biography of John Wanamaker, Founder and Builder: America's Merchant Pioneer from 1861 to 1922* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 160, 401-404.

[15] Rodman Wanamaker quoted in Lester 1908, p. 72.

[16] On John Wanamaker's visit to the Holy Land, see Herbert Adams Gibbons, *John Wanamaker* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1926), vol. 2, pp. 52-54. Gibbons observed that "Through his son Rodman he [John Wanamaker] became acquainted with the work of H. O. Tanner, whose choice of religious subjects greatly appealed to him." *Ibid.*, p. 80.

[17] The brief notebook observations that Tanner recorded in the Holy Land are published in Marcia M. Mathews, *Henry Ossawa Tanner: American Artist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 82-4.

[18] On the work of University of Pennsylvania ethnologist Stewart Culin as ethnological collector and department store display consultant for the Wanamakers circa 1900, see Simon Bronner, "Object Lessons: The Work of Ethnological Museums and Collections," in *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880-1920*, ed. Simon J. Bronner (New York: Published for The Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum by W. W. Norton, 1989), pp. 233-34. See also Alan Trachtenberg, "Imaginary Indians and American Identity: The Wanamaker Expeditions, 1908-1913," in Roland Hagenbüchle and Josef Raab, eds., *Negotiations of America's National Identity* (Tübingen: Stauffenberg, 2000), pp. 283-302.

[19] John Davis, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 17. Davis discusses Tanner briefly (pp. 208-100), emphasizing the artist's expressive, subjective style in depicting the Holy Land, but not the politics of race or Christian colonialism, as I do below. For an excellent historical examination of such issues as they relate to the Protestant "American Colony" in Jerusalem, see Shamir 2003, especially pp. 31, 36, 52.

[20] Henry Ossawa Tanner, "The Story of an Artist's Life, Part II," *The World's Work* 18, no. 3 (July 1909), p. 11773.

[21] Merkley 1998, pp. 29-33.

[22] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 31.

[23] Gospel of John, 3:1-3, Authorized (King James) Version, quoted in Mosby 1991, p. 168.

- [24] James Jacques Joseph Tissot, *La vie de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ* (Tours: Alfred Mame et Fils Editeurs, 1896-97). The English translation was *The Life of Our Saviour Jesus Christ* (New York: McClure, 1899).
- [25] On Tissot's expeditions to Palestine and reputation as a biblical archaeologist, see Nancy Rose Marshall and Malcolm Warner, *James Tissot: Victorian Life/Modern Love* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), pp. 163-94.
- [26] The uncanny return of such questions—regarding archaeological accuracy, stigmatization of Jews, etc.—at the beginning of the twenty-first century in connection with Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* (Icon/Newmarket Films, 2004) invites speculation about whether certain historical structures facilitate the simultaneous reassertion of realism and racism around issues of Christian belief.
- [27] Edith Coues, "Tissot's 'Life of Christ,'" *Century Magazine* 51, no. 2 (December 1895), p. 294.
- [28] Documentary evidence indicates that Tanner was well aware of Tissot's success. This is clear from a letter written by Robert Ogden to Tanner in 1900: "I like the idea of the production of a collection that may be suggested by the subjects that you may find in Palestine. It strikes me that, if the number of pictures is sufficiently large to command general interest, it would be a very great success. The Tissot pictures, when first exhibited in this country [the United States], were welcomed by crowds of intelligent people. Of course, they were greatly advertised in advance, but some of the wisdom of this world may be applied to the development of your idea." Robert C. Ogden to Henry Ossawa Tanner, 12 July 1900, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., microfilm reel D306.
- [29] Quoted in Pinder 1997, p. 223.
- [30] W. L. Hunter, *Jesus Christ Had Negro Blood in His Veins: The Wonder of the Twentieth Century* (Brooklyn: W. L. Hunter, 1901); Benjamin Tucker Tanner, *The Color of Solomon—What?* (Philadelphia: A. M. E. Book Concern, 1895).
- [31] Kersey Graves, *The World's Sixteen Crucified Saviors* (Boston: Colby and Rich, 1875).
- [32] Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- [33] Henry Ossawa Tanner, "The Mothers of the Bible—By H. O. Tanner. The Last of a Series of Four Great Biblical Paintings: Mary," *Ladies Home Journal* 20, no. 2 (January 1903), p. 13.
- [34] Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 80.
- [35] David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 298. The reference to "THE WORLD'S CHRIST" comes from Rev. T. DeWitt Talmage, *From Manger to Throne, Embracing a New Life of Jesus the Christ, and A History of Palestine and Its People* (Philadelphia: Historical Publishing Co., 1890), p. 652.
- [36] Henry Ossawa Tanner, "Effort," in *Exhibition of Religious Paintings by H. O. Tanner* (New York: Grand Central Art Galleries, 1924), n.p. There is no indication of a source for the phrase that Tanner placed in quotations.
- [37] According to critic Vance Thompson, Tanner "is a mystic, but a mystic who has read Renan and studied with Benjamin Constant." Vance Thompson, "American Artists in Paris," *Cosmopolitan* 29, no. 1 (May 1900), p. 17.
- [38] Ernest Renan, *Life of Jesus*, trans. Joseph Henry Allen (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), p. 93. In a footnote, Renan locates the etymological origins of "Galilee" in the Hebrew *Gelil haggoyim* or "circle of the Gentiles." The art historian Sally Promey notes that Renan's philosophy evolved over the course of his career, such that he largely abandoned his early anti-Semitism in favor of greater racial pluralism and religious tolerance. Sally M. Promey, *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's "Triumph of Religion" at the Boston Public Library* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 209-10.
- [39] Elbert Francis Baldwin, "A Negro Artist of Unique Power," *The Outlook* 64, no. 14 (7 April 1900), p. 793. Tanner is also included in the classic essay by Ray Stannard Baker, "The Tragedy of the Mulatto," *American Magazine* 65, no. 6 (April 1908), pp. 590 and 598.
- [40] Lester 1908, p. 70.
- [41] Thompson 1900, p. 20.
- [42] Baldwin 1900, p. 796.
- [43] Florence L. Bentley, "Henry O. Tanner," *The Voice* 3, no. 11 (November 1906), p. 480.

- [44] "An Afro-American Painter Who Has Become Famous in Paris," *Current Literature* 45, no. 4 (October 1908), p. 405.
- [45] Lester 1908, p. 73.
- [46] Eunice Tietjens, untitled manuscript, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm reel D307, frames 1969-76. According to Tietjens (frame 1975), "In his personal life Mr. Tanner has had many things to contend with. Ill-health, poverty and race prejudice, always strong against a negro, have made the way hard for him. But he has come unspoiled alike through these early struggles and through his later successes."
- [47] Henry Ossawa Tanner to Eunice Tietjens, 25 May 1914, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, microfilm reel D306, frames 116-17.
- [48] On Tanner's genealogy, see Mosby 1991, pp. 23-24; Mathews 1969, p. 6. According to Mathews, Tanner's mother Sarah had been born to a slave named Elizabeth and Charles Miller, "the mulatto son of a white planter in Winchester, Virginia."
- [49] For a detailed discussion of such "blood" calculations and their relevance for nineteenth-century American literature and culture, see Werner Sollors, "The Calculus of Color," in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 112-41. On Boas and Mendel, see George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), especially pp. 161-93.
- [50] Christian, or "Adamite," monogenism is distinguished from both rational monogenism and polygenism (the latter two conducive to racist scientism) in John S. Haller, Jr., *Outcasts from Evolution: Scientific Attitudes of Racial Inferiority 1859-1900* (Carbondale, IL.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), pp. 70-74.
- [51] On the etymology of "hybrid" as originating in the ancient Latin *hybrida*, referring to the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, see Sollors 1997, p. 129. Sollors also notes the influential essay by antebellum segregationist Josiah Nott entitled "The Mulatto a Hybrid—probable extermination of the two races if the Whites and Blacks are allowed to intermarry," *American Journal of Medical Sciences* 66 (July 1843). For a discussion of nineteenth-century American scientific notions of hybridity and debates about the origins and boundaries of the human species, see Haller 1995, pp. 69-94.
- [52] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 184.
- [53] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 4.
- [54] *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- [55] On the United States as exemplifying a plantation "settlement colony" model of economic organization marked by multifarious aspects of "hybridity," see Obenzinger 1999, pp. 9-11.
- [56] Sollors 1997.
- [57] Walter Benn Michaels, "The No-Drop Rule," *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Summer 1994), pp. 758-69.
- [58] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 7, 9, 11, and 23.
- [59] Daniel Burke, FSC, "Henry Ossawa Tanner's *La Sainte-Marie*," *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 64-73, especially pp. 66-67, where the author discusses the scriptural basis for the Mater Dolorosa in a passage from the Gospel of Luke (2:34-35), Authorized (King James) Version: "And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed."
- [60] Helen Cole, "Henry O. Tanner, Painter," *Brush and Pencil* 6, no. 3 (June 1900), p. 105. On Dagnan-Bouveret, see Gabriel P. Weisberg, *Against the Modern: Dagnan-Bouveret and the Transformation of the Academic Tradition* (New York: Dahesh Museum of Art, 2002), pp. 74-75, fig. 73.
- [61] For a discussion of Gérôme's painting, see Fred Leeman, "Shadows over Jean-Léon Gérôme's Career," *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1997-1998), pp. 88-99. The French painter had been the teacher of Tanner's teacher, Thomas Eakins, when the latter studied in Paris from 1866 to 1870. In 1896, Gérôme admired Tanner's *Daniel in the Lions Den* on display at the Salon and arranged to have it hung "on the line" after it originally had been "skied" by the exhibition committee. Mathews 1969, p. 74.

- [62] Tissot, *La vie de Notre Seigneur Jésus Christ* vol. 2, p. 210; also reproduced in Marshall and Warner 1999, p. 181.
- [63] Mosby 1991, pp. 148-49, fig. 45. This work relates, in turn, to Tanner's celebrated *Annunciation* (1898, Philadelphia Museum of Art), in which the angel Gabriel appears not in visible human form, but as an intensely bright shaft of light. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-65.
- [64] *Ibid.*, pp. 151, 174.
- [65] In addition, Tanner may have doubted his ability to father a child at all, given his own fragile constitution and history of illness as well as prevailing myths about "mulatto" infertility, which were incessantly cited by racist scientists, writers, and others in nineteenth-century America as evidence for the ills of "miscegenation." On Tanner's sicknesses and fragile constitution, see *ibid.*, pp. 57-58, 60, 90. Even as late as 1893 a biologist named W. A. Dixon could publish an article entitled "The Morbid Proclivities and Retrogressive Tendencies in the Offspring of Mulattoes" in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (cited in Haller 1995, p. 58). On the other hand, Tanner could have been aware of competing discourse about "hybrid vigor," the pseudo-scientific belief that interracial progeny were *superior* products combining the strengths of multiple ancestries. In 1911, sociologist Lionel Lyde re-stated ideas more than a century old when he wrote "While race blending is not everywhere desirable, yet the crossing of distinct races, especially when it occurs with social sanction, often produces a superior type." Quoted in Sollors 1997, p. 133. For more on "mulatto sterility" and "hybrid vigor," see also Haller 1995, pp. 58, 160-61, 118-19. With so many overlapping spiritual, social, and physical concerns evoked by the autobiographical structure of *Mary*, it seems no wonder that Tanner chose to draw a veil over them all by placing a shroud over the Christ child.
- [66] Henry O. Tanner, "The Mothers of the Bible," *Ladies Home Journal* 19, no. 10 (September 1902), p. 9 ("Sarah"); 19, no. 11 (October 1902), p. 13 ("Hagar"); 19, no. 12 (November 1902), p. 13 ("Rachel"); 20, no. 2 (January 1903), p. 13 ("Mary").
- [67] Shamir 2003, pp. 33, 37-40, 43-50; Davis 1996, pp. 16-18.
- [68] Henry White Warren, *Sights and Insights, or, Knowledge by Travel* (New York: Nelson & Phillips, 1874), p. 246, quoted by Shamir 2003, p. 39.
- [69] Shamir 2003, p. 33.
- [70] Tanner traveled to Egypt in 1897, Algiers in 1908, and Morocco in 1912. Although he produced some paintings of Algerian and Moroccan scenes, they lack the narrative emphasis and human interest of his biblical works set in the Holy Land. His primary concern in North Africa seems to have been with color, light, and architecture, not Islamic culture. On the Algerian and Moroccan works, see Mosby 1991, pp. 200-11, 226-34. On modernization in Ottoman Palestine during the late nineteenth century, specifically resulting from privatization of property and the growing incursions of Western capitalism, see Pamela Ann Smith, *Palestine and the Palestinians 1876-1983* (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 7-37.
- [71] On the origins of the American Colony, see Shamir 2003, pp. 40-45.
- [72] Mosby 1991, pp. 220-23. A similarly light-skinned adult Christ appears in Tanner's *Christ at the Home of Lazarus* (ca. 1912, location unknown), illustrated in *ibid.*, p. 207. In the latter work, Tanner himself appears in the guise of Lazarus. The phonetic and orthographic proximity of "Jesus" and "Jesse" (not to mention the biblical significance of Jesse as the father of David) further underscores a sense that Tanner viewed his personal life and the story of Christ as closely interrelated.
- [73] *Ibid.*, pp. 153-4, 184. Mosby points to Tanner's *Return of the Holy Women* (1904, Cedar Rapids Art Gallery, Cedar Rapids, Iowa) as signaling the emergence of the new, brighter palette, ostensibly inspired by El Greco.
- [74] Hale Woodruff, "My Meeting With Henry O. Tanner," *The Crisis* 77, no. 1 (January 1970), p. 9.
- [75] For early references to the influence of Benjamin-Constant and Laurens, see Scarborough 1902, pp. 663-4; Bentley 1906, p. 480; Lester 1908, p. 67; Tanner 1909, p. 11773.
- [76] Clara MacChesney, "A Poet-Painter of Palestine," *International Studio* 50, no. 197 (July 1913), p. xii.
- [77] Rilla Evelyn Jackman, *American Arts* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1928), p. 211.
- [78] Tietjens, unpublished manuscript, 1914, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, reel D307, frame 1974.
- [79] According to another critic writing in 1913, "His present style is much changed. Not only has he a greater breadth of vision, but his effects are cooler, grayer in tone and higher in key, not as black and brown in the shadows, or hot in color, as formerly. Thus his new canvases

have a more spiritual, dreamlike quality." Clara MacChesney, "A Poet Painter of Palestine," *International Studio* 50, no. 197 (July 1913), p. 12.

[80] Tanner to Tietjens, 25 May 1914, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, reel D306, frame 117.

[81] Tanner's *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures* is closely modeled after a photograph showing the artist's wife and son posing in biblical clothing. Mosby 1991, p. 220, fig. 81. For Tanner's expression of admiration for Monet and Cézanne, see Woodruff 1970, p. 11. Commenting on his late palette (using none of Tietjens's racial language), Tanner told Woodruff "I see light chiefly as a means of achieving luminosity, a luminosity not consisting of various light-colors but luminosity within a limited color range, say, a blue or blue-green. There should be a glow which indeed consumes the theme or subject. Still, a light-glow which rises and falls in intensity as it moves through the painting. It isn't simple to put into words."

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Nicodemus Visiting Jesus*, 1899. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Courtesy of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. Joseph E. Temple Fund [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Resurrection of Lazarus*, 1896. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée d'Orsay, Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, NY [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Banjo Lesson*, 1893. Oil on canvas. Hampton, Virginia, Hampton University Museum [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Frederick Gutekunst, *Portrait of Henry Ossawa Tanner*, 1907. Washington, D.C, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, 1850-1978 (bulk 1890-1920), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *The Savior*, ca. 1900-1905. Oil on canvas mounted to plywood. Washington, D.C, Smithsonian American Art Museum / Art Resource, N.Y. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 6, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, *Baptism of Jesus Christ*, 1886-1894. Watercolor. Brooklyn Museum of Art, Purchased by Public Subscription [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 7, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Mary*, 1900. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia, LaSalle University Art Museum, Purchased with funds donated by Regan and Regina Henry [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, *Madonna of the Rose*, 1885. Oil on canvas. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, Portrait of Jessie Macauley Tanner (Mrs. Henry O. Tanner), ca. 1899. Unidentified photographer. Washington, D.C, Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, 1850-1978 (bulk 1890-1920), Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 10, Henry Ossawa Tanner, *Christ and His Mother Studying the Scriptures (Christ Learning to Read)*, 1910. Oil on canvas. Dallas Museum of Art [\[return to text\]](#)