

## Lucas Cranach

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**Lucas Cranach: The Ten Commandments 1**

Lucas Cranach was a skilled artist who recognized the value of a drawing for its educational purposes. Though a protestant, Cranach created pieces of art, such as *The Ten Commandments*, to inspire and instruct others in the ways of God. Cranach was “an early adherent of Luther’s Reformation”<sup>1</sup> and thus, believes in Luther’s earlier teachings and readings. If Cranach did in fact keep with Luther’s later variations of his teachings, then we would come to believe that Cranach had the same view towards women as Luther himself held. The focus of this essay is to disprove the following statement: *this painting by Cranach has an obvious misogynistic tinge that merely reflects Luther’s attitudes toward women*. This paper will show that Lucas did not intend to show misogyny through his painting and that any such belief is only through over-analysis with a modern mind-set.

Luther’s Reformation, though not wholly egalitarian, brought about large changes in how females were treated and viewed. It stressed that “all vocations have equal merit

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<sup>1</sup> John P. Mckay, B.D. Hill, and J. Buckler, *A history of Western Society*. Volume B: *From the Renaissance to 1815*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition (Boston, 2003), 462.

in the sight of God” and thus brought dignity “to those who performed ordinary, routine domestic tasks.”<sup>2</sup> Though the home was still the domain of the Wife, it was a place “for the exercise of gentler virtues—love, tenderness, reconciliation...” and with allowing marriage to the clergy, “the many women who had been priests’ concubines and mistresses: now they became legal and honorable wives.”<sup>3</sup> Luther’s reformation also called for the abolishment of private confession which freed women from discussing their sexual acts, with priests. Finally the reformation called for girls as well as boys to be taught in schools the catechism and the bible. From today’s point of view Luther’s beliefs could still be seen as sexist, but in comparison with the catholic standpoint of the time, the Lutheran attitude towards women was truly progressive.

With this progressive view of Luther in his belief system, it is hard to conceive that Cranach had any sort of sexist, let alone misogynistic tinge in his painting. The text where this painting is published asks the question “Is it unfair to say that the painting has a misogynistic tinge, given the female devil in number 5 and the wife in number 9?”<sup>4</sup> It is not only unfair but very odd to suggest such a tinge to the painting. In the fifth panel, the commandment ‘thou shalt not kill’ is represented. A female devil stands behind a man who is about to kill another man. In the ninth panel, a female devil is behind a female who is in bed with a man who is not her husband. The commandment ‘thou shalt not commit adultery’ is being broken here. Taken alone, these images may suggest that women are the cause of evil in the world and their subordination is just. The female devil persuades the man to kill, and the female devil persuades the other man to sleep with the

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 465.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 466.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 462.

devilish wife who needs little encouragement to cheat on her husband. The problem is these images are part of a larger painting which does not continue with the same theme.

In all the other images representing the other 8 Commandments, there are male devils encouraging and male humans breaking the commandments. Since all the commandments are equal in weight and in God's eyes, breaking one is no worse than breaking another, there is no justification for suggesting that the painting is misogynistic.

Of course any line of interpretation remains open, one could suggest that since the painting is male dominated, with males breaking almost all the commandments, and males the victims of the improper behaviour, it is inherently sexist. It is sexist in the way that it shows that males are the foremost perpetrators of breaking the commandments, which may or may not be true, it also shows that women are a lesser presence in society and in god's eyes, as they are not represented in all the images. So sexist this painting may be, it would have to be both sexist against males and females, but misogynistic is taking the issue a little far.

Furthermore, the arc representing the covenant between god and humankind does not once pass through the body of a female human (a female devil is transected and this will be brought up later). The fact the covenant does not intersect a female could be interpreted with a misogynistic tinge if one wishes, but it could also be explained without such a negative interpretation. It could mean absolutely nothing as the arc does pass through scenes with women present. Similarly it could be a reflection of the earlier sexist note which indicates the lack of women in the overall painting. It is not however a belief by the artist Cranach to indicate that women do not share the covenant to god that men share.

It may be more plausible to conclude that Cranach meant something more when in five of the ten scenes; a devil is transected by the arc of the covenant. This may or may not have been purposeful, but if it was on purpose one could conclude that Cranach believed that the human relationship with god has inherently evil properties and only the Lutheran belief that only faith will be rewarded is the way to interpret the bible. Penance will not be enough to save one's soul for if they break a commandment their faith will be put into question.

Again, Luther had a progressive stance when it came to women and how they were viewed and treated. It is true he still saw them as wives restricted to the household, he also believed in their education and their value as a partner in matrimony: "Next to God's word there is no more precious treasure than holy matrimony. God's highest gift on earth is a pious, cheerful, God-gearing, home-keeping wife, with whom you may live peacefully, to whom you may entrust your goods, and body and life."<sup>5</sup> There is no reason to believe that Cranach's painting went against the views of Luther, meaning there is no reason to interpret *The Ten Commandments* with a misogynistic tinge; that would be contrary to Luther's own words. It may have a tinge of sexism which was rampant in those times in all religions, but to label it as a misogynistic painting is unfair and unjustified.

### **Bibliography**

Buckler, J. et al, *A history of Western Society*. Volume B: *From the Renaissance to 1815*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition (Boston, 2003), 462.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 466.