Inscribed on the Book:
Gustave Doré's Biblical Aesthetics

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The number and variety of places where one can find reproductions of Gustave Doré's (1832–1883) biblical imagery is simply staggering, and attempting to effectively enumerate or characterize their appropriation and circulation presents significant challenges. Even limiting an inquiry to the Bible illustrations as they were originally published in *La Sainte Bible* (Tours: Alfred Mame et fils, 1866) prompts some confounding questions. How does one make sense of the 274 images that constitute the first edition of the Doré Bible, to say nothing of the dozens that were altered or replaced in the slightly later second edition (some of which were subsequently reproduced much more widely the earlier versions)? More fundamentally, the images were *made* to be reproduced, the result of a complex, collaborative process between Doré and a respected team of engravers. Accounting for the ongoing, even iterative, nature of these images as reproductions necessarily means remaining cognizant of and open to the often-surprising places where Doré's biblical imagery appears.

That much was clear to me from the early stages of my engagement with this material as a dissertator in the early 2010s. The book that resulted—*Gustave Doré and the Modern Biblical Imagination* (Schaefer 2021)—is ultimately as much about the nature of image reproduction and reception as it about Doré specifically, and beyond the confines of its pages are countless illuminating instances that did not fit neatly within that narrative.

One that immediately struck me upon my initial encounter during the dissertation research phase and that has remained firmly in my mind is Frank Burch Brown's 2000 book *Good Taste, Bad Taste and Christian Taste*, the cover of which features Doré's representation of Satan's temptation of Christ--slightly cropped -- from the second edition of the Bible illustrations (fig. 1). It was not simply the fact that Doré's work appeared on the cover that drew me to this particular book; its contents proved particularly illuminating for an art history graduate student with limited experience in the study of religious aesthetics. Burch Brown advocates for a combined approach to religious and aesthetic discernment, laying out a process of intellectual reformation that dispenses with the entrenched categories of "good" and "bad" taste. His aims were directed towards helping adherents identify, in his words, "points in life and worship where aesthetic aims and religious aspirations (or aversions) are wedded to one another, and thus to see how spiritual growth can have a properly artistic and aesthetic dimension subject to criticism, cultivation, and education" (Burch Brown 2000, 12). The polemic at play here does not imply a new taxonomic characterization of religious cultural production, but rather a particular

approach to religious *and* aesthetic formation that is guided by Christian values *and* post-Enlightenment modes of judgment.
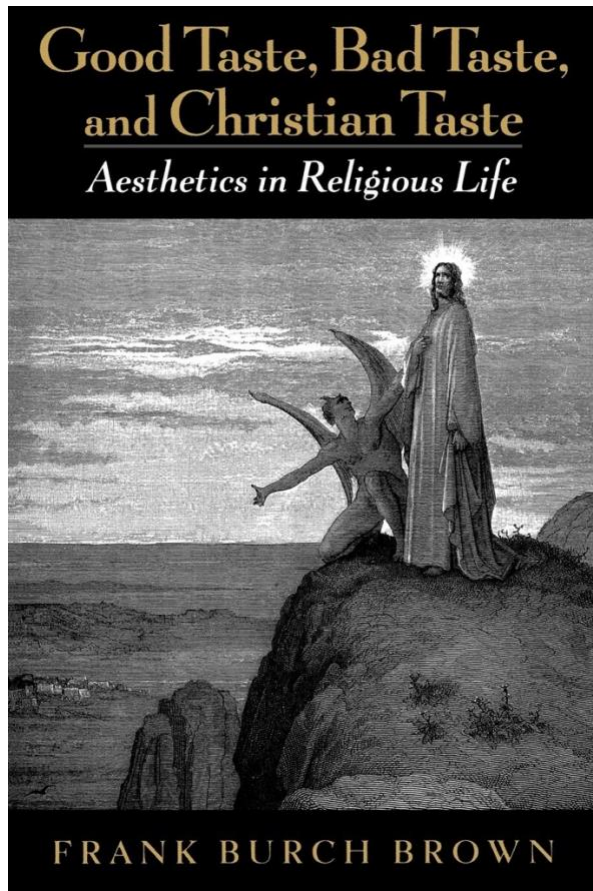
Fig. 1, cover of Frank Burch Brown's *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life*

In brainstorming the present essay, I was compelled to return to Burch Brown's book and to consider the possible reasons for the choice of *this* illustration as its banner image. It is a quintessential representation of "good" and "bad", and one that is predicated on looking and not looking. The biblical texts indicate that Jesus was shown the kingdoms of the world in an instant (Matt 4:8-9; Luke 4:5-7), but in Doré's image we are prompted to consider the effects of Jesus's presumed domination in physical terms. Satan gestures toward the vast landscape as Jesus raises his eyes away and toward the heavens, almost to suggest that merely to look would risk the possibility of succumbing to temptation. The desires activated by viewing are presented as the ultimate diabolical prey.

The potential harms of unrestricted, uneducated viewing could perhaps be the motivation behind this image's presence on the cover of Burch Brown's book. And indeed, the discourses the author engages are ones in which Doré has played an important role. Aesthetic discernment and religious formation have always been intertwined (as Burch Brown is acutely aware), but Doré's images were a prominent feature of the narratives around these topics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in America, as the development of modern bourgeois identities were tied up questions of religion, class, and national politics. Doré's images, which were ubiquitous by the end of the nineteenth century, provided fundamental learning tools, generally recognized as didactically illuminating, but limited in their devotional potential due to their primarily narrative function. Devotional imagery was more readily associated with Old Master painters and a few more recent figures (for instance, Heinrich Hofmann and Bernhard Plockhorst). However, in terms of the sheer number of biblical subjects associated

with a single artist (some of which were unprecedented in the history of Bible illustration), Doré long occupied a singular position.

But there is another layer to my interest in the cover of Brown's book, and that is fundamentally tied to the concepts it engages: a knee-jerk reaction to what I might articulate as the inferior quality of this image, at least in contrast to some of Doré's more epic illustrations. Despite the thematic relevance to the book outlined above, in plain terms it is not what I would identify as one of Doré's better illustrations. This, I would readily admit, is a matter of personal preference (that is, taste), but it is also a matter of art historical analysis and interpretation. Consider, for instance, the version of the scene that appears in the first edition of *La Sainte Bible* (fig. 2). The figures of Jesus and Satan are diminished, though dramatically silhouetted by the revelatory illumination in the distance. The real focus of this iteration, however, is the variegated mountain landscape in the foreground, an indication of the level of quality cultivated among the engravers who transformed Doré's drawings into printable matrices, and which set these works apart from the robust and ever-growing field of illustrated books in the mid-nineteenth century.
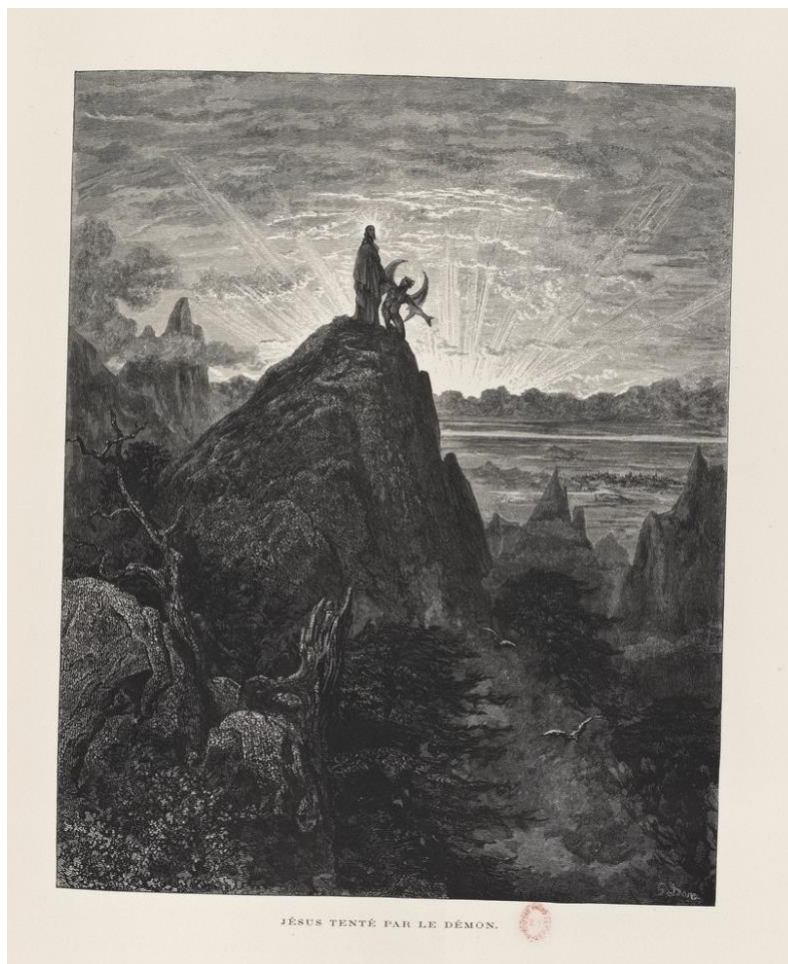

JÉSUS TENTÉ PAR LE DÉMON.

Fig. 2, Gustave Doré and Adolphe François Pannemaker, *Jesus Tempted by the Demon*, from *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 2 (Tours: Alfred Mame et fils, 1866) [first edition], 348.

It is also worth noting that in both versions of the scene, Doré's representation of Satan is clearly indebted to Ary Scheffer's famous painting (fig. 3).[1] This is not an infrequent occurrence in Doré's output – visual correspondence to existing representations (even his own) of the same or a similar subject. Read charitably, it is the inevitable outcome of a highly prolific artist tackling several major projects with dozens, even hundreds, of illustrations simultaneously.

Fig. 3, Ary Scheffer, *The Temptation of Christ*, c. 1851-52. Oil on canvas, 345 x 241 cm. Musée du Louvre.

I hesitate to make these kinds of qualitative statements regarding the aesthetic value of Doré's work, in part because they are in no way indicative of the arguments laid out in my book. My aim was to demonstrate the significance of Doré's biblical imagery in shaping modern visual culture, taking into account the artistic, scholarly, and popular discourses around 'the Bible' as a religious, historical, and literary monument. While critical evaluations of Doré's work necessarily form a significant component of this reception narrative, they are mobilized in order to substantiate the cultural landscape in which the images operated. Moreover, I would not want a reader here to infer that art historical analysis more generally is still rooted in the connoisseurial assessments that often characterize its representation in popular culture. At its core, the book takes as a

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[1] Scheffer painted several versions of this subject. The one pictured here was commissioned in 1849 but had not been delivered by the artist's death in 1858. It entered the Louvre's collection in 1861; it is highly likely that Doré, a frequent visitor to the Louvre, would have seen it there.

given that Doré's biblical imagery is in need of rigorous examination because of its ubiquity in both sacred and secular contexts. I venture an evaluative assertion here to foreground something that is also central to Brown's book: that that analysis requires the disinterested research that necessarily accounts for historically grounded concepts of aesthetics and taste.
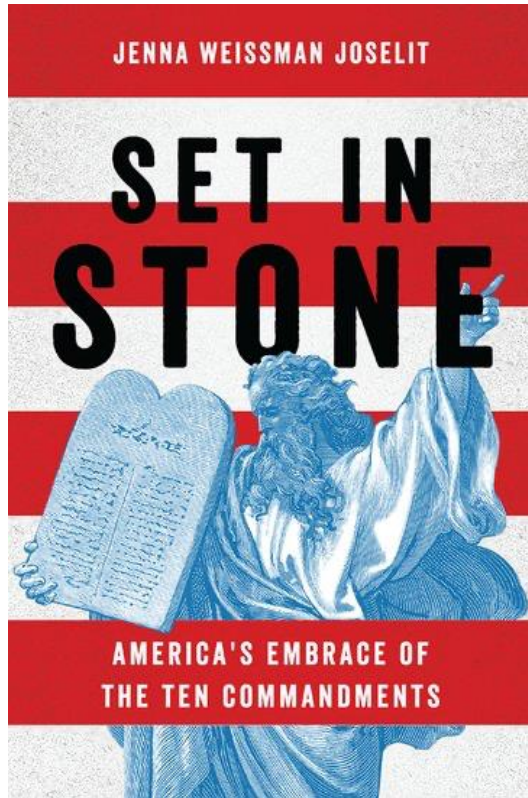

Fig. 4, cover of Jenna Weissman Joselit's *Set in Stone: America's Embrace of the Ten Commandments*

Taking a further step back, another one of the book's key objectives is to offer due recognition to a figure who looms large over the visual culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. And of all the audiences to whom it is aimed, the one that is perhaps least likely to need convincing of Doré's significance is biblical scholars. A cursory glance at the catalogues of major academic presses alone may demonstrate this point, where Doré's images frequently appear as cover images. A recent publication in Oxford's biblical studies list, Jenna Weissman Joselit's *Set in Stone: America's Embrace of the Ten Commandments* (fig. 4, is a potent representation of the adaptability of Doré's images and, at a deeper level, the crystallization of form and theme. The figure of Moses derives from an illustration I discuss in both the introduction and epilogue of my book; it is one of the more frequently reproduced of Doré's illustrations, notably, for my purposes, as paint-by-numbers (figs. 5, 6). I argue that these represent a culminating moment in the history of Doré's biblical imagery, and that their function as templates corresponds directly to the means by which the illustrations were originally crafted and to the Mosaic tradition more

broadly (as I will discuss momentarily). As a prolific illustrator, Doré developed a practice of working directly on a woodblock that would subsequently be engraved. The result is that very few of Doré's 'original' drawings for any of his illustrations survive (and those that do are generally in the form of unengraved or partially engraved woodblocks that were ultimately rejected). The intervention of the engraver is, with an image like this one, the first of innumerable moments of translation and adaptation to which Doré's work would be subjected.

The moment represented in this illustration is likewise powerful with respect to the production of the image. The tablets of the law represent a material manifestation, a divine incision akin to the process undertaken by the engravers of Doré's illustrations. Like the tablets, the engraved woodblock was subject to further material violence, the former destroyed via Moses's wrath, the latter becoming the discarded remains of industrial production—engraved woodblocks like Doré's were often themselves reproduced in more durable metal materials via stereotyping and electrotyping, and thus, like the original drawings, few original blocks are extant. Moreover, as is made particularly evident through the cover of *Set in Stone*, the actual text of the laws is indecipherable. They are legible as signifiers of an author's hand, but whose hand is most present here: God's? Doré's? That of the engraver, Héliodore Pisan? Ultimately, I argue, this points to the fluidity of the laws *as well as* the images, as both take on the role of a kind of reproducible matrix.

Fig. 5, Gustave Doré and Hélidore Pisan, *Moses Descends from Sinai*, from *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 1 [first edition], 284.
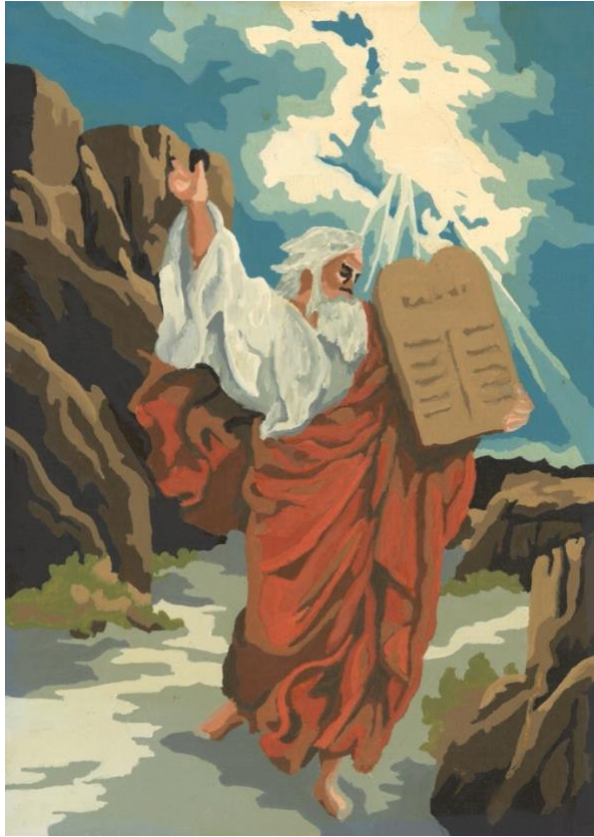
Fig. 6, Moses, from paint-by-number kit produced by Craft Master in 1979.

The cover of *Set in Stone* offers further insights into the visual and material conditions of Doré's images and their adaptations. Two characteristics immediately stand out: the detachment of Moses from the full illustration and the colorization of the image. The fact that a detail like the figure of Moses could be isolated out is indicative of the very nature of a medium like wood engraving, in which an image is created wholly through line. One of the stylistic innovations with which Doré and his engravers are often credited is the more tonal appearance of the images—what print scholars describe as "interpretive" engraving, in contrast with the more linear, contour-heavy "facsimile" style. Regardless, line remains the constitutive element, and in Doré's images there is often still a relatively clear distinction of detail, delineated through modeling and reinforcing the separation of visual planes. In chapter 3 of my book, I discuss how the planar delineation of space and particularly of architectural elements in many of Doré's images can be linked to his consumption of Parisian theater culture, in which flat set pieces are staggered across the stage (figs. 8, 9). *Moses Descends from Sinai* operates in a visually similar way, hence, the relative ease of removing a primary figure in the immediate foreground and placing it in a different context.

Fig. 7, Gustave Doré and Jacob Ettling, *Joseph Revealing Himself to his Brothers*, from *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 1 [first edition], 188.

Fig. 8, Edouard Despléchin, "*Moses*: Act III: The porch of the temple of Isis: stage maquette," 1863. Bibliothèque nationale de France.

The role that color plays in Doré's images may seem like a counterintuitive point of entry, considering the illustrations consist of ink on paper, frequently

prompting their characterization as "black-and-white." What superficially appears like a self-evident statement is in fact riddled with misconceptions, most obviously in the fact that the page is rarely "white," and the ink can represent myriad tonal variations of "black." This is not simply a matter of pedantic print connoisseurship; it has distinct consequences for the effect of the images as they are reproduced. This, to me, was crucial in a book that was fundamentally about reproduction, and thus underscored the need for all of the images to be printed in color, even and most especially the "black and white" illustrations. But color reproduction entails multiple valences, including the colorizing effects we see employed in *Set in Stone*, as well as other book covers--for instance, Jason A. Staples' *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism* (figs. 9, 10). The former case appears to be the result of a single-tone filter; the blue completes the tripartite vexillological invocation of "America." In the latter, color has been added in a more naturalistic fashion, though the bold red of Jacob's tunic and the luminous white of the angel pop against the subtle variations of the background landscape. The addition of color to Doré's images is a persistent component of their reception history, particularly in the American context and in forms like magic lantern slides and prayer cards.
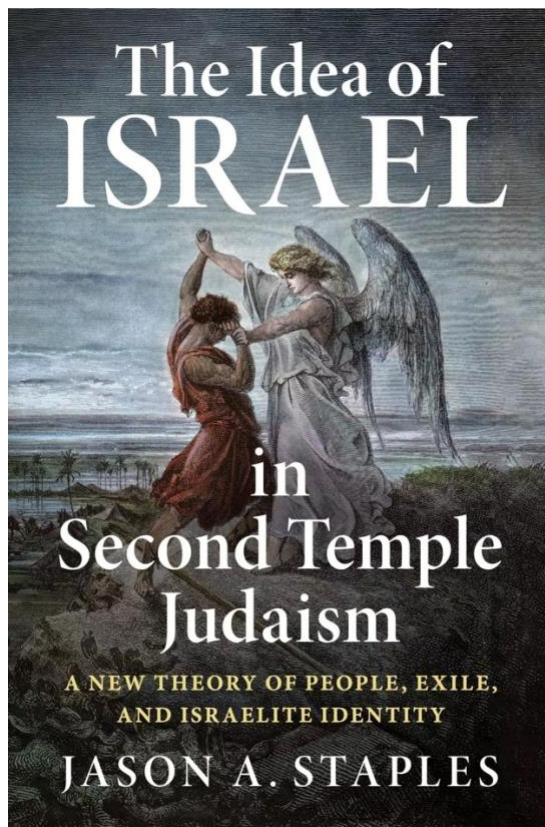

Fig. 9, cover of Jason A. Staples' *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*

Fig. 10, Gustave Doré and Charles Laplante, *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, from *La Sainte Bible*, vol. 1 [first edition], 164.

In the first several decades of the twentieth century, we begin to see other artists eclipse Doré in popularity and reproduction—artists like James Tissot, Warner Sallman, Harold Coping, and Bernhard Plockhorst, whose born-color images became thoroughly embedded in American religious material culture. It is worth noting that within that broad category, and including the medium of paint-by-number (a largely mid-century phenomenon), Doré's images play a decreasing role. That *Moses Descends from Sinai* was reproduced by three different paint-by-number manufacturers likely speaks as much to Doré's influence on Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* as it does to their applicability to the paint-by-number medium. DeMille, like many early filmmakers, drew heavily from Doré's oeuvre and was forthright in this fact, noting, "In each Bible picture I have brought to life one or more of Doré's great illustrations" (Schaefer 2021, 266). Though Doré's images would see continual, persistent reproduction from their initial publication through today, "coming alive" in cinematic form through Georges Meliès, Jean Cocteau, and Terry Gilliam as well as DeMille, by the mid-twentieth century his name would be somewhat divorced from the images (with the exception of certain audiences, among them biblical scholars and bibliophiles).

The ubiquity of Doré's Bible illustrations is a direct outcome of their emergence prior to the advent of international copyright. Even after a system began to be codified with the Berne Convention of 1886 (three years after Doré died at the

age of 51), the United States resisted compliance for over a century, only finally submitting to its statutes in 1989. The "official" rights to Doré's Bible illustrations were held not only by the Mame company, but also by the British firm Cassell, Petter & Galpin (whose acquisition Doré had a direct hand in facilitating). In particular, Cassell's widespread reach engendered the international circulation of the Bible illustrations, but the burgeoning field of photo-mechanical reproduction in the second half of the nineteenth century prompted numerous 'pirate' publishers to capitalize on Doré's renown. Doré expert Dan Malan has spent decades collating an ever-growing list of places where the images have been reproduced, a truly admirable and mind-boggling feat (Malan 2020).

I highlight this aspect of Doré's legacy in part for polemical reasons. In the current moment, and particularly with respect to the dizzying discourse around NFTs (non-fungible tokens) in the art world, questions of originality, authenticity, ownership, and rights to images have taken on greater urgency in popular media (Rivers Ryan 2021). This is coming on the heels of a period when museums and other cultural repositories are increasingly making high-resolution images of public domain works not only more easily accessible, but also open to any use -- educational, commercial, etc. For a variety of legal and logistical reasons, the burgeoning open access policies have not touched every cultural institution worldwide. Yet the current trends nonetheless represent a significant departure from earlier moments when copyright was frequently claimed for photographic documentation of public domain works. In other words, one would potentially have to pay a fee to reproduce a painting by, say, Rembrandt, if the repository's photograph of the work was still within the bounds of copyright.

The complexity of these developments is beyond our present scope; however, it is relevant in so far as it aligns with the issues that are at the core of my book regarding the nature and consequences of reproduction. What cannot escape my notice is the preponderance of Doré images available via commercial licensing firms (e.g. Bridgeman, Getty, Alamy). While these and similar companies can in theory work to protect the intellectual property and by extension the financial liquidity of creative expression, in the case of someone like Doré, whose work is primarily in the form of illustrations in books that are out of copyright, the implicit claim of ownership or even simply of management is inane.[2] The same cannot, of course, be said for libraries or other institutions responsible for stewarding illustrated materials that are out of copyright, considering the costs and labor associated with preservation, digitization, etc.

I call attention to these issues in the interest of demystifying the process of image reproduction, particularly though not exclusively with respect to academic scholarship. The logistics and costs of image reproduction have always been a

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[2] Questions of "ownership" are highly contingent and have increasingly come under the purview of artists' estates. No such entity exists for Doré, and both the Mame and Cassell companies have long since been incorporated into other publishing firms.

stymying factor for art historical publishing; in an ideal world, one of the long-term outcomes of open-access policies will be an increase in the number and scope of publications that engage rigorously with images. The artificial ownership embedded in licensing firms' claims over public domain materials is an unnecessary impediment to this process, and one that I hope will become more broadly recognized and rectified.

Finally, and with respect to the present subject, I hesitate to appeal to biography (which plays a very limited role in the book), but I would hazard here the possibility that Doré would welcome the seemingly limitless possibilities for appropriating his images afforded by digital publishing and the open-access policies of many cultural institutions. Doré was, as Malan has asserted, an artist "in search of an audience" (Schaefer 2021, 189); today, his audience is a global one. That his name has stayed somewhat obscure despite this persistent ubiquity is another matter, and a recognition of the scale of his influence is necessarily a goal of this book. More crucial, though, is a broader reckoning with the stakes of the Bible, and with its visual and material manifestations, in what we call modernity—a reckoning that must account for Doré's role.

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