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Taylor, Paul. *Michelangelo's mistakes in the generation of Christ.*

2004

Article

**To cite this version:**

Taylor, P. (2004). Michelangelo's mistakes in the generation of Christ. *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, *67*, 285–294 .

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**Date submitted:** 2019-11-20

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# MICHELANGELO'S MISTAKES IN THE GENERATION OF CHRIST*

*Paul Taylor*

Why did Michelangelo, or his adviser if he had one,[1] decide to paint the Ancestors of Christ on the Sistine ceiling? Despite the theological ingenuity of some scholarly readings in the past century,[2] it may well be that the subject was inspired by the shape of the ceiling itself. The small spaces around the windows must have presented Michelangelo with his greatest iconographic headache. He had sixteen lunettes and eight small spandrels to fill.[3] The lunettes were each split into two halves by a window, so he had room for (16 × 2) + 8 = 40 figures or figure groups. On the first page of the Gospels is a list of forty names—the Ancestors of Christ. One can imagine that the choice seemed providential.

It was obviously more difficult to find a theme to fit these forty spaces than it was to fill the twelve corbels, which might have been used to depict the apostles[4] or the minor prophets or (as Michelangelo eventually decided) a cycle of prophets and sibyls. It seems possible, therefore, that the decision to paint the Ancestors of Christ came first, and that the rest of the iconographic programme evolved from that initial decision.[5] In the lunettes and small spandrels Michelangelo painted the opening verses of the New Testament; in the central panel of the ceiling he painted the opening of the Old Testament: he filled the medallions and corner spandrels with stories from the rest of the Old Testament, while the prophets and sibyls on the corbels act as a kind of typological bridging passage. The whole ceiling thus echoes the theme of the typological cycle on the walls.

Michelangelo could have filled his forty spaces with forty figures; but he seems to

* I am grateful to Charles Hope and Charles Robertson for suggestions and help.

1. C. Hope, 'The Medallions on the Sistine Ceiling', this *Journal*, L, 1987, pp. 200–4, has argued that Michelangelo is unlikely to have had a theological adviser, since he made use of an illustrated copy of a *volgare* Bible when painting the medallions. The idea has not found favour with all Michelangelo scholars; see e.g. J. Shearman, 'Una nota sul progetto di papa Giulio', in *Michelangelo: la capella Sistina* (Atti del convegno, 1990), ed. K. Weil-Garris Brandt, Rome 1994, pp. 29–36 (32). My own view is that Hope is probably right; I do not think that a theologian would have made so peculiar a selection of prophets and sibyls, nor have allowed Michelangelo to break the narrative sequence of the Old Testament with the Sacrifice of Noah. But it may be that the truth lies somewhere between two extremes: perhaps Michelangelo's adviser was rather lax.

2. E.g. E. Wind, 'The Book of the Generation of Jesus Christ', in *The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo*, ed. E. Sears, Oxford 2000, pp. 90–112; E. Dotson, 'An Augustinian Interpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling', *Art Bulletin*, LXI, 1979, pp. 223–56, 405–29.

3. As Shearman observed, the four large spandrels at the corners of the ceiling are shown as split in two on the drawing made for Pope Sixtus IV by Piermatteo d'Amelia. Shearman thought that Michelangelo and his master mason Piero Rosselli must have removed the central strips of stucco in the summer of 1508 (Shearman, 'Progetto', as in n. 1, p. 30: presumably the strips of stucco were removed in two seasons, since there was no scaffold at the altar end in 1508). We cannot be sure that d'Amelia's drawing is an accurate reflection of the ceiling as Michelangelo found it; but even if it is, there were only so many iconographic solutions to 48 available spaces, and the decision to merge the corner spandrels may have been triggered by the realisation of how the 40 remaining spaces could be used.

4. This was part of the original plan, which Michelangelo rejected because it seemed to him 'cosa povera'. *Il Carteggio di Michelangelo*, ed. G. Poggi, Florence 1973, III, p. 8.

5. Shearman's argument (as in n. 1, p. 35) that the Ancestors cycle may have been an afterthought ignores the low probability of Michelangelo's finding so perfect a fit between available wall space and theological aptness.

have decided that this would be monotonous, and that it would be better to paint the actual generations; to show families with their children, picking up on the repeated use of the word 'begat' in the text.[6] This would allow him to paint more figures, to demonstrate his inventive powers, and also, perhaps, to charge a higher fee.[7]

The Genesis cycle on the ceiling moves in time from Creation (altar end) to the Drunkenness of Noah (entrance end); it was clear that the Ancestors of Christ should follow chronology too, and that Abraham should be over the altar, Joseph over the entrance. Michelangelo therefore worked out, presumably in his head,[8] an overall plan for the scheme, a conjectural reconstruction of which I give as Diagram 1.[9] This plan, as I shall try to show, was not carried out in the way that Michelangelo intended because he made a number of mistakes while executing it. The actual arrangement of the Ancestors is given in Diagram 2.

Michelangelo must have begun the lunettes with the two at the entrance end,[10] because it is clear that after he had painted them he changed his mind about how the composition should be arranged. In each of the entrance lunettes we see two families (Figs 1 and 2), one on either side of the (fictive) windows. In the other lunettes (except for those at the altar end, of which more later) Michelangelo only painted a single family; father on one side, mother on the other, with children distributed between them.

Why did he change his mind? It may have been because he thought that the space was too small for the figures. But from the way he approached the problem later, I think that his motive was probably iconographic rather than pictorial. He must have been perturbed to realise that, by painting two families, he had painted not two generations, but three. In the Jacob and Joseph lunette, the figures at left are perhaps Jacob, Jacob's wife, and Joseph as a child; in which case the figures in the right of the lunette are Joseph, the Virgin Mary, and Christ as a child, with another child. Although it has been claimed in the literature that the woman on the right is the Virgin,[11] this does not seem very likely, especially as Christ—who appears nowhere else on the ceiling, and who is unlikely to have been accorded a small walk-on part—is either turned away from us and idly playing,[12] or half hidden by his father's

6. This has already been suggested by Lisa Pon, to whose article I am much indebted. L. Pon, 'A Note on the Ancestors of Christ in the Sistine Chapel', this *Journal*, LXI, 1998, pp. 254–58.

7. Shearman (as in n. 1), p. 32. This suggestion may not be accurate, however, because after painting the lunettes above the entrance, Michelangelo cut down on the numbers of figures in each lunette (as described below).

8. There are no surviving plans for the Ancestor cycle, and the surviving sketches, held in Oxford in the Ashmolean Museum, have no names attached. K. T. Parker, *Catalogue of the Collection of Drawings in the Ashmolean Museum*, II, *Italian Schools*, Oxford 1956, cat. nos 299–306, pp. 143–47; F. Hartt, *The Drawings of Michelangelo*, London 1971, pp. 87–88. The Ashmolean sketches have not always been attributed to Michelangelo in the past, but are now generally accepted.

9. I follow Michelangelo's order all the way down to the Roboam and Abias lunette, assuming that the alteration in the numerical sequence at Iosias was intentional.

10. It is possible that Michelangelo first painted the Ancestors in the spandrels, and then returned to paint the Ancestors in the lunettes. It is at any rate likely that he did this when he came to paint the altar end of the chapel, since none of the 31 preparatory figures for the Ancestors in the Ashmolean sketchbook (as in n. 8) can be associated with Ancestors in the spandrels: it would appear that he had already painted the latter and was using the sketchbook solely in order to plan the lunettes. For the argument that follows it does not greatly matter whether he painted the Ancestors in one campaign, or painted the lunettes after the spandrels.

11. E.g. C. de Tolnay, *Michelangelo II: The Sistine Ceiling*, Princeton 1945, p. 85; Wind (as in n. 2), p. 105.

12. Wind (as in n. 2), p. 105 n. 39, suggested that one of the children was St John the Baptist, but, as Betsy Sears has observed, from the recent cleaning

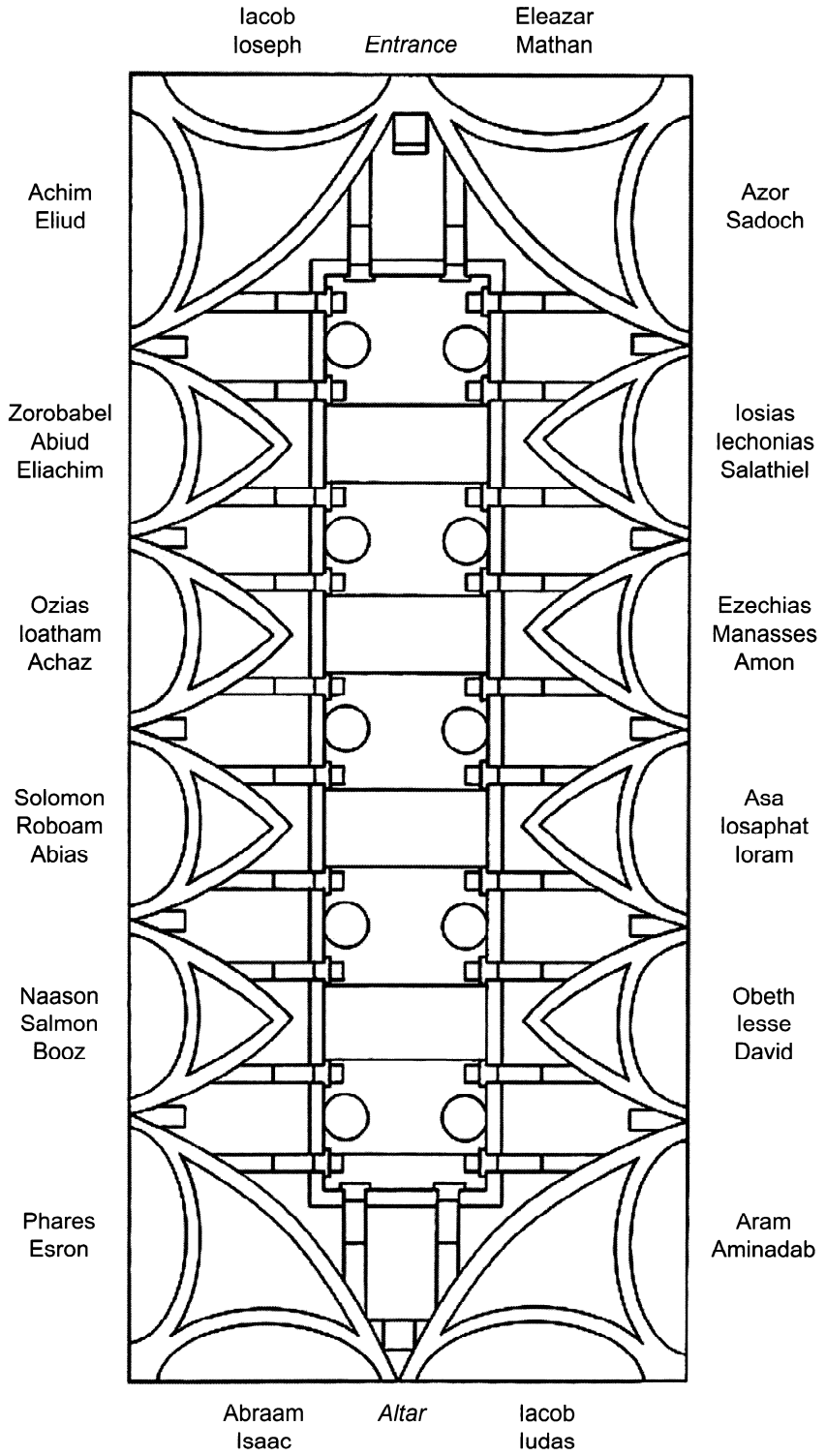


Diagram 1. Conjecture: the Ancestors of Christ as originally planned (cf. Diagram 2, p. 293)

Figure 1. 'Eleazar, Mathan', Sistine ceiling lunette (entrance end)

Figure 3. 'Azor, Sadoch', Sistine ceiling lunette

head; and if the second child is meant to be a sibling then this conflicts with Mary's perpetual virginity. It seems more likely then that one of the children is Joseph, and that the adults with him are Jacob and Jacob's wife. But if that is the case then the adults in the left half of the lunette must be Jacob's father Mathan and his wife, which means that three generations have been depicted in a single lunette, thus messing up the scheme.[13]

Michelangelo therefore decided that he would paint a single family in each lunette. The parents would represent one generation and the child or children the next generation. This is precisely what he did in

it appears that the child in the foreground is female.

13. Another possibility of course is that the family on the left of the lunette is supposed to be the Holy Family. The problem with this theory is that the figure who should be the Virgin is too old, tired and retiring for the part; and once again, Christ is treated as just another child.

Figure 2. 'Iacob, Ioseph', Sistine ceiling lunette (entrance end)

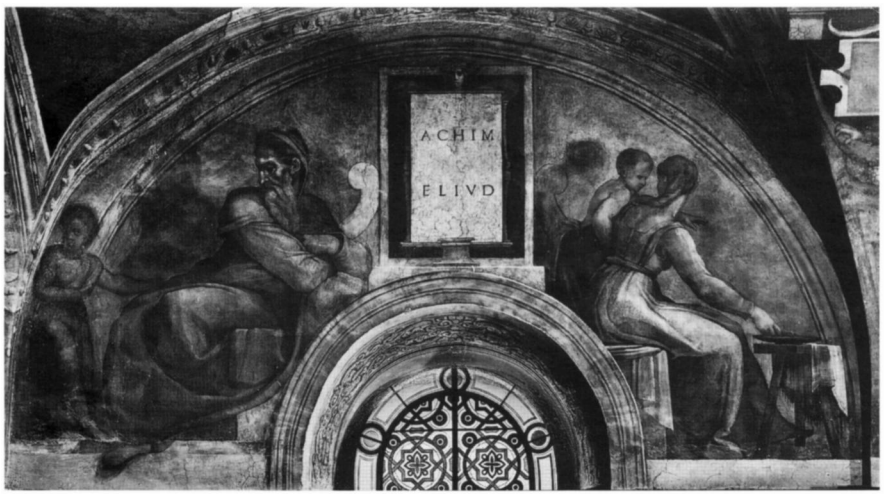


Figure 4. 'Achim, Eliud', Sistine ceiling lunette

the next two lunettes, depicting Achim and Eliud, and Azor and Sadok (Figs 3–4). When he came to the lunettes beneath the spandrels he continued with this idea. He painted a family in the spandrel, and a family in the lunette. If the father in the lunette was a child in the spandrel, then he had painted three generations. Thus he paints Zorobabel, Zorobabel's wife and their two children in the spandrel, and then Zorobabel's son Abiud and his wife with their two children, one of whom is Eliachim, in the lunette (Fig. 9).

Michelangelo kept to this consistent scheme when he was painting the entrance half of the chapel. But when the scaffolding was taken down and re-erected in the altar half,[14] and he began by painting the two lunettes above the altar (Figs 5–6),[15] he forgot the clear system that he had devised

14. F. Mancinelli, 'Il ponteggio di Michelangelo per la capella Sistina e i problemi cronologici della volta', in Weil-Garris Brandt, ed. (as in n. 1), pp. 43–49 (47).

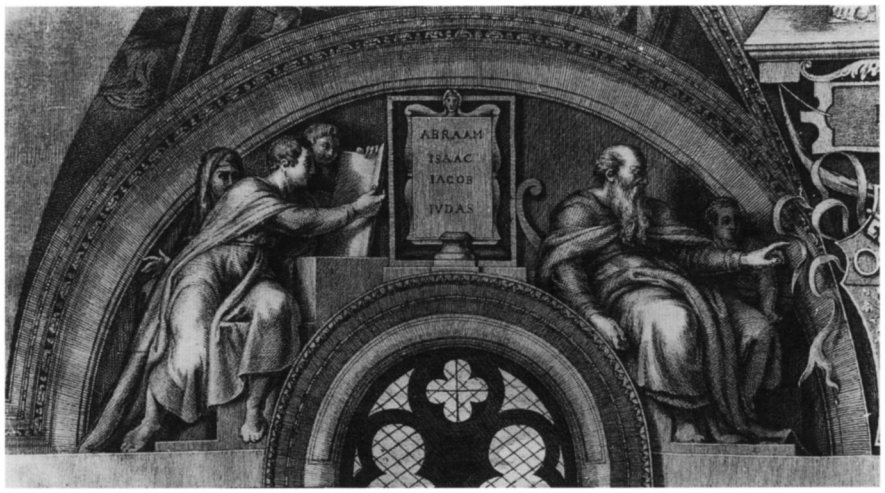


Figure 5. 'Abraam, Isaac, Iacob, Iudas', Sistine ceiling lunette (altar end), now destroyed

Figure 7. 'Aminadab', Sistine ceiling lunette

while painting the other half of the ceiling. In the Abraham lunette, he should have painted Abraham, Sarah and their children, including their son Isaac. Instead, he painted Abraham with a child in the right half of the lunette, and Isaac with his wife and their child in the left half of the lunette. He had, in short, reverted to the system he had used at the start; the lunette depicted three generations. This time, however,

15. There are two reasons for thinking that Michelangelo began with these lunettes above the altar when he came to paint the Ancestors in the west end of the chapel. The first is the argument outlined below, without which it is hard to explain why he made Naason and Aminadab childless, especially given the fact that in his preparatory drawing for Naason's wife in Oxford he drew children at her feet (Hartt, as in n. 8, fig. 116). Then too in the Abraham and Phares lunettes (Figs 5–6) there were supports on either side of the name plaques, a feature which we see in the entrance half of the chapel (Figs 1–4 and Fig. 9), but only on these two plaques in the altar half. I am grateful to Charles Hope for pointing this out to me. On the engravings illustrated here see below, n. 20.

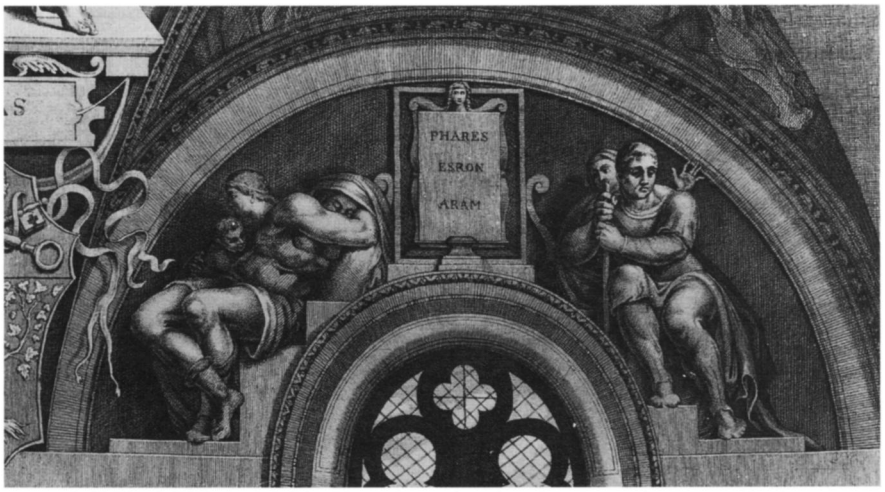


Figure 6. 'Phares, Esron, Aram', Sistine ceiling lunette (altar end), now destroyed

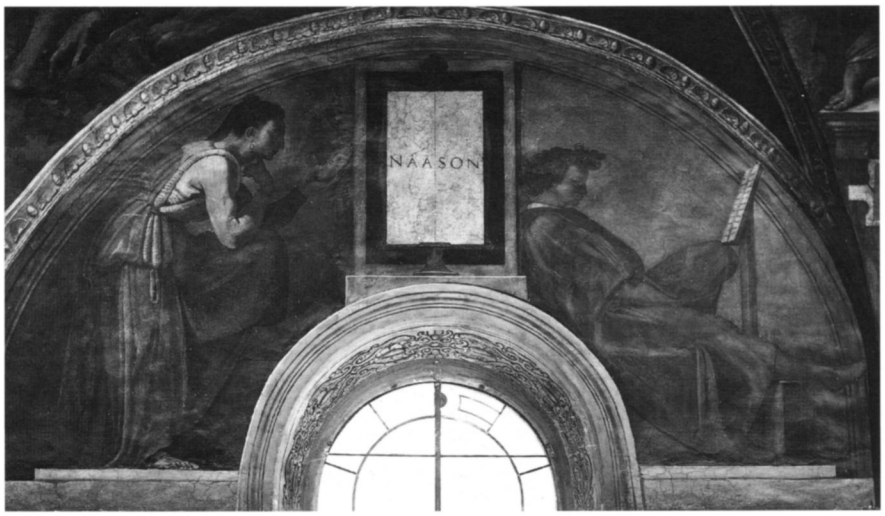


Figure 8. 'Naason', Sistine ceiling lunette

Michelangelo decided that he would simply rearrange his scheme in order to accommodate his error. He would paint three generations in the other lunette above the altar, as well (Fig. 6);[16] then he would paint a single generation in the two lunettes on either side. This is why Aminadab and Naason and their wives have no children (Figs 7–8).[17] In these lunettes he is painting a single generation.

This disaster behind him, Michelangelo proceeded to paint the other lunettes using the same system he had employed for the entrance end. It is clear that he painted the figures first and filled in the names later. We can tell this because the Roboam/

16. As observed in the previous note, Naason's wife has children with her in the Ashmolean sketches.

17. Assuming that, as in the Abraham lunette, the man on the right is the father of the man on the left. If the child on the left is identical with the man on the right, Michelangelo has painted two generations but has still used three names.

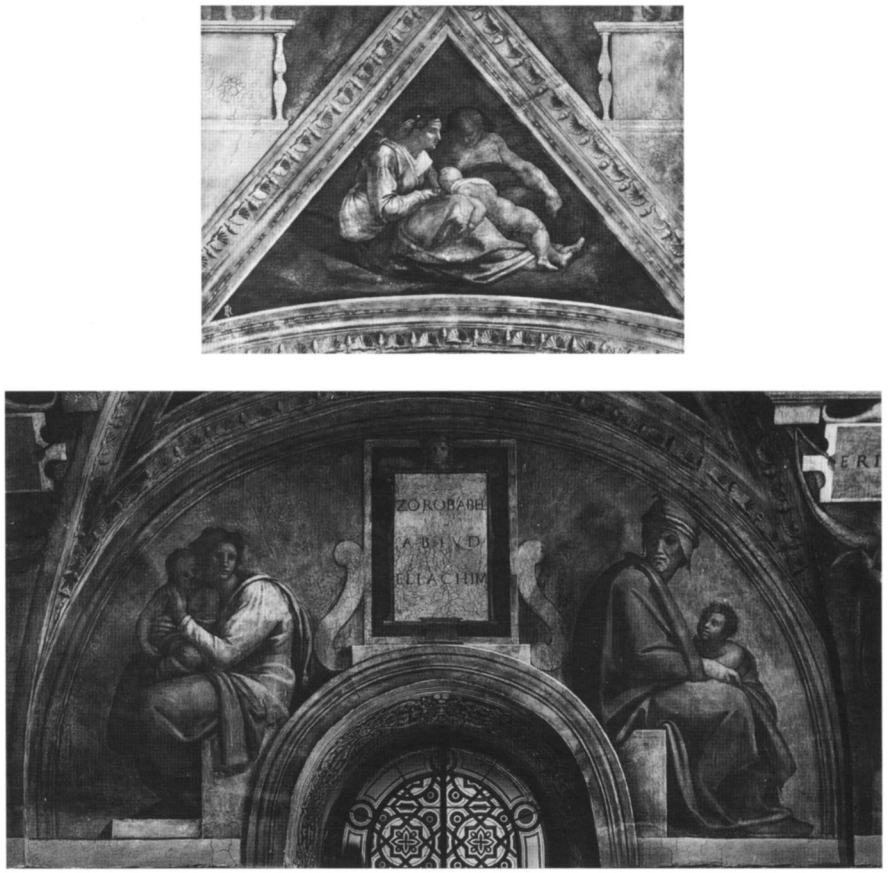


Figure 9. 'Zorobabel, Abiud, Eliachim', Sistine ceiling spandrel and lunette

Abias lunette and spandrel contains three generations, but only two names (Fig. 10). In fact, Michelangelo had run out of names sooner than he had expected. The reason for this was that, earlier on, he had made a second mistake on the Abraham lunette. When painting in the names[18] he had written:

ABRAAM

IACOB

IVDAS

He had forgotten Isaac.

At this point Michelangelo could have gone round knocking out all the names in the lunettes. But either because he had to finish his work in a hurry,[19] or because he was sick of the whole business, he just added the name of Isaac, so it read:

ABRAAM

ISAAC

IACOB

IVDAS

The interpolation is clear to see in the engraving after Ottley's drawing (Fig. 5).[20]

18. Charles Hope has suggested to me that Michelangelo might have asked pupils to paint in the names. I think that this is unlikely, since he would surely have told the pupils to correct their mistakes.

19. Condivi and Vasari (in the 1568 edition) claimed that Michelangelo finished work on the ceiling before he was ready, after an altercation with the pope. A. Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarotti*, ed. G. Nencioni, Florence 1998, p. 35. G. Vasari, *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*, ed. G. Milanesi, Florence 1906, VII, p. 177.

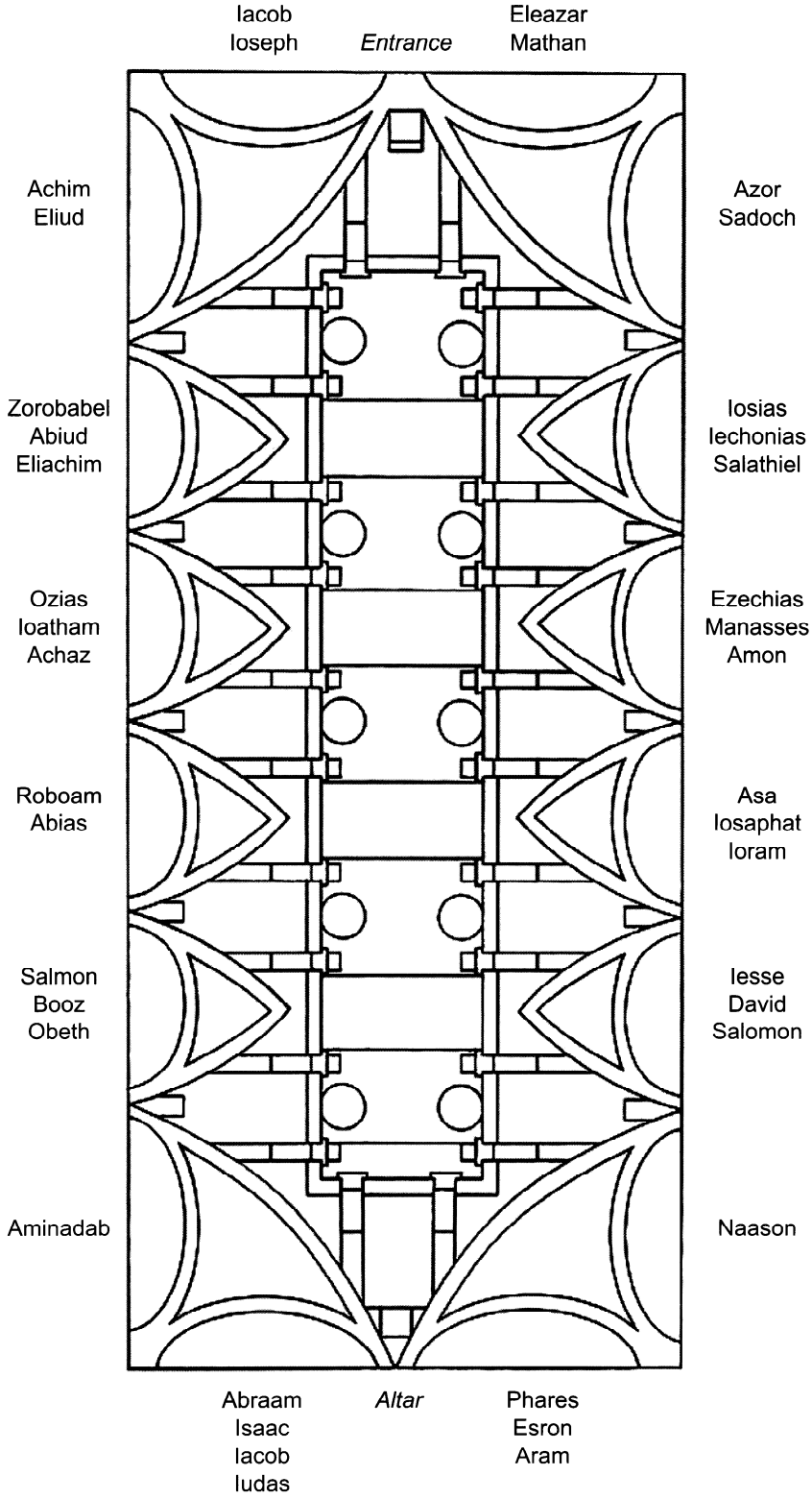


Diagram 2. The Ancestors of Christ as named on the Sistine ceiling lunettes

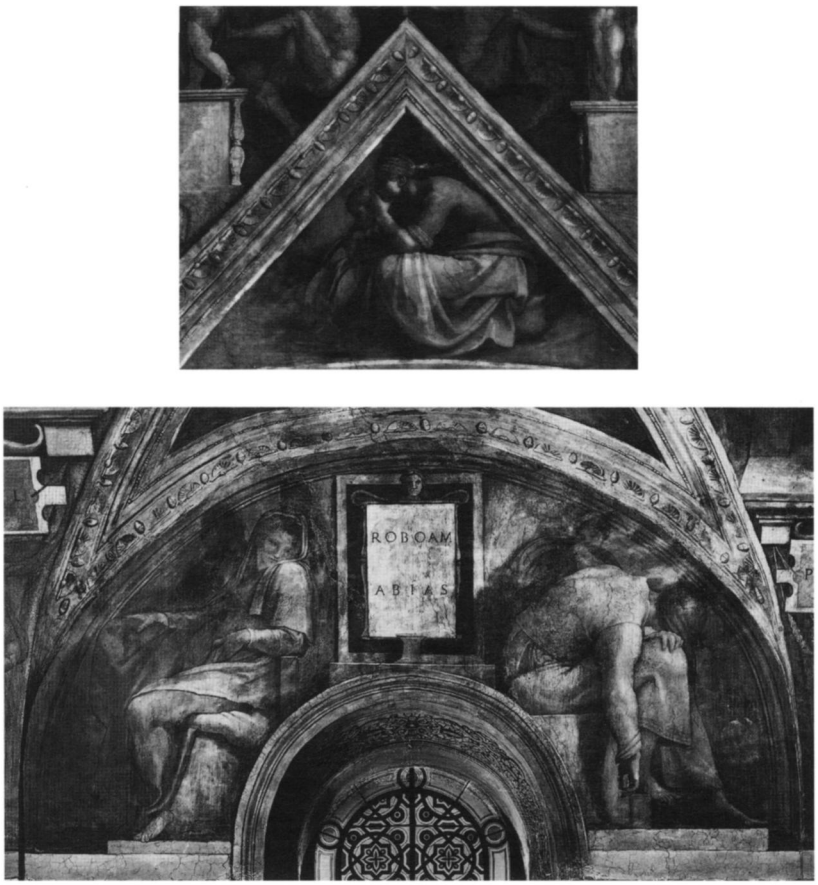


Figure 10. 'Roboam, Abias', Sistine ceiling spandrel and lunette

The memory of this small fiasco probably rankled with Michelangelo, and it may explain his decision, when he came to paint the Last Judgement, to destroy the offending altar lunettes.

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*Warburg Institute*

20. These prints were 'drawn by William Young Ottley, and engraved under his direction, upon the authority of a drawing of the early part of the 16th century, in the possession of Samuel Rogers Esq.' (W. Y. Ottley, *A Series of Plates, Engraved after the Paintings and Sculptures of the Most Eminent Masters of the Early Florentine School*, London 1826, pl. LV). The Rogers drawing appears now to be lost; J. C. Robinson, *A Critical Account of the Drawings by Michel Angelo and Raffaello in the University Galleries, Oxford*, Oxford 1870, pp. 327–28. For a less detailed drawing of the destroyed lunettes, in the Royal Collection at Windsor, see E. Steinmann, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle*, 2 vols, Munich 1905, II, ill. 208 (p. 453).