

# The creation of light in paradise and prints

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The title of this article stems from two senses of the term 'creation': on the one hand, it refers to the biblical Creation narrative in Genesis whereby God, through His divine power, brings the world into existence. On the other hand, creation is the product of human inventiveness and imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Creation in the artistic sense is particularly relevant here because it is through certain works of art in the Baillieu Library Print Collection that I will be exploring the visual tradition of the passage in the book of Genesis in which God makes manifest light and dark, or day and night, as well as the creation of the sun, moon and stars. The exceptionally beautiful print by John Martin (*Creation of light*, 1824, opposite), first inspired my interest when I came across it during my 2008 internship in the Print Collection. Although made to illustrate John Milton's epic poem *Paradise lost*, rather than for a specifically Christian purpose, the print represents God figuratively in full human form. How could an image of God be made by any artist, particularly any artist concerned with or aware of Christian doctrine, when certain passages of the Bible explicitly warn against making an image of God to worship? According to Deuteronomy, no one is allowed to

paint or sculpt an image of God because no one actually knows what God looks like (Deut. 4: 15–18).<sup>2</sup> In the Christian and Hebrew Bible, the second commandment reads:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God ... (Exodus 20: 4–5).

While some have assumed that under this commandment Christians (and Jews) should not be concerned with images, others have interpreted it not as a banishment of all images, but rather, as instructions for the use of images.<sup>3</sup> As Robin Jensen notes, while many early theologians tried to deal with the complexities of doctrine and the question of God's visibility to the human eye, 'certain artistic representations suggest a level of discontinuity between popular practice and theological argument, or perhaps a perceived difference between artistic representation and verbal discourse'.<sup>4</sup> As a body of significant Christian visual art developed, many church leaders found images useful in assisting practice and

devotion, while still attempting to avoid idolatry.<sup>5</sup> It seems in this context that the pictorial representation of God could evolve. The very existence of images of God suggests that such portrayal was not universally impossible or blasphemous, although certain appropriate or acceptable representations developed over the course of centuries. Indeed, the lack of portraiture in early Christian art suggests a conscious effort to avoid idolatry and deceptive holy portraits.<sup>6</sup> In this article I discuss how three works in the Baillieu Library Print Collection belong to this visual tradition of depicting God, not through portraiture as such, but as a character in a narrative, performing certain acts or works.<sup>7</sup>

My interest in the visual depiction of the Genesis passages was sparked when I first saw John Martin's mezzotint (*Creation of light*), produced as part of a set of illustrations for John Milton's epic poem *Paradise lost* (first published in 1667 in ten books),<sup>8</sup> which draws upon the Old Testament for the primary structure, plot and characters. God, Adam and Eve are the primary characters, but Milton gives Satan, the fallen angel and precursor of original sin, a more prominent part in contrast to the usual focus of Genesis:

John Martin, (*Creation of light*,  
book 7, line 339 of John Milton's *Paradise lost*),  
engraved 1824, 'proof' printed by  
Chatfield & Coleman,  
published in London by Septimus Prowett, 1825,  
mezzotint, image: 19.0 x 27.9 cm;  
plate: 25.3 x 35.3 cm; sheet: 29.6 x 40.8 cm.  
Reg. no. 1993.2148,  
Baillieu Library Print Collection,  
University of Melbourne.

the creation of Eden, Adam and Eve and their subsequent fall from grace. In *Paradise lost*, Milton explores his own ideas about Creation, particularly the paradoxes which he acutely sensed existed in Genesis. Notably, he considered the word 'infinite' problematic in describing God.<sup>9</sup> Milton's poem can be compared to an artist's attempt to conceive and interpret the divine Creation, yet in written form. In 1825, Martin exhibited a large oil painting of the same subject entitled *The Creation* at the Society of British Artists. This painting is now lost, but contemporary accounts indicate that it was of a very similar design to Martin's print, exhibited in the same show.<sup>10</sup> The print's title (*Creation of light*) refers to the second and fourth day of Creation, where God creates light and darkness followed by the sun, moon and stars. Yet as Michael Campbell observes in his book *John Martin: Visionary printmaker*, the term could also be referring to the mezzotint process itself, whereby the artist creates an image from black to white, rather than building the image from black lines as in etching or line engraving.<sup>11</sup> *Creation of light* demonstrates Martin's expert use of mezzotint. The subtle gradations of white, grey and black in the figure of the Almighty contrast with the sun's

brilliant rays pouring down upon Him. The bright moon in the right hand corner shines intensely through the pitch black ink of space. This magnificent image of God creating the lights in heaven is amongst the most powerful of Martin's *Paradise lost* illustrations, and together with *Bridge over chaos* (1824, see p. 36), is the most sought after by collectors.<sup>12</sup> Both are held in the Baillieu Library Print Collection.

Michael Campbell, in his comprehensive study of Martin's

prints, suggests that *Creation of light* owes little to previous illustrators of Milton; while most likely true, Campbell goes on to argue that Martin has relied upon the poetry itself to create his vision rather than upon earlier pictorial interpretations.<sup>13</sup> I will argue, however, that Martin's work has been influenced by a long tradition of Christian artworks depicting the Creation from Genesis, dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries when God the Father is no longer



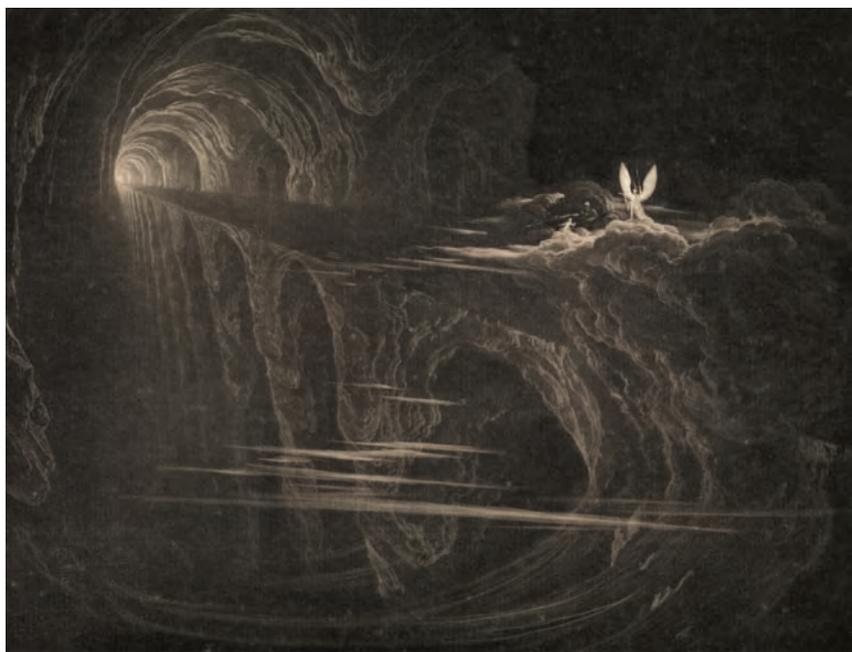
John Martin, (*Bridge over chaos*, book 10, lines 312 and 347 of John Milton's *Paradise lost*), engraved 1824, 'proof' printed by Chatfield & Co., published in London by Septimus Prowett, 1826, mezzotint, image: 19.3 x 27.0 cm; plate: 25.4 x 34.7 cm; sheet: 27.3 x 37.9 cm. Reg. no. 1993.2147, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

represented as a mere arm or hand, but is shown with a face, then bust and at length the entire figure.<sup>14</sup> When exhibited in 1825 at the Society of British Artists, Martin's work was strongly criticised, primarily for its attempt to quantify God, setting His scale by a human form which the viewer had to assume was immense.<sup>15</sup> The *European Magazine* for 1825 found Martin's picture 'absurd beyond all conception' and his fellow artist B.R. Haydon exclaimed it 'the grossest of all gross ideas to make the power and essence of the

Creator depend on size ... the artist really deserves as much pity as the poorest maniac in Bedlam'.<sup>16</sup> Not all the reviews were completely negative however, with the reviewer for *The Literary Gazette* claiming that the 'design of the performance is grand and striking; the chaotic character of the dividing elements is well conceived,' although remarking offhand that the work was 'hardly amenable to the laws of pictorial criticism'.<sup>17</sup> This conservative and moral reaction to Martin's work in the first quarter of the 19th century is

remarkable, given that the composition and subject are derived from a long visual tradition which Martin seems to be explicitly emulating.

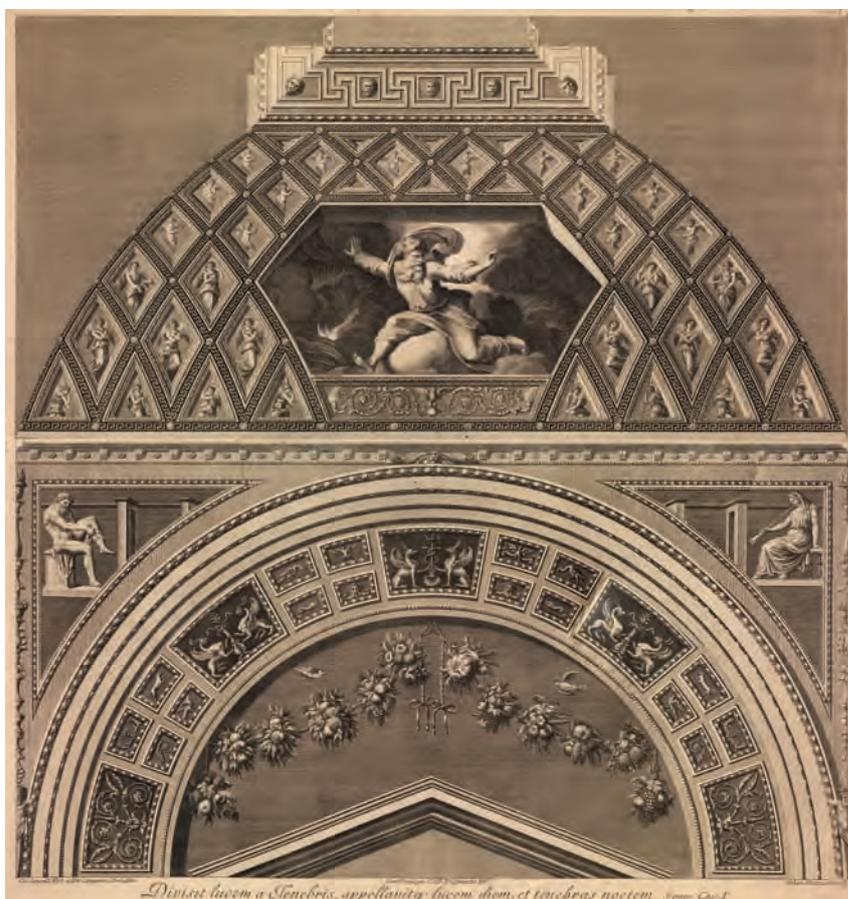
Raphael (1483–1520) created in 1518–1519 the famous *Logge* (rooms) in the Vatican for Pope Leo X. A print (c.1772–1776) by the Roman reproductive engraver Giovanni Ottaviani (1735–1802), is after one of the walls in bay 1 of Raphael's *Logge*.<sup>18</sup> It is an elevation of the entire quarter of one bay, from the lower stucco wall with its festive lunette filled with garlands and birds, to the top of the vault with Raphael's fresco *God separates light from darkness*, one of four Creation scenes.<sup>19</sup> The theological program in the *Logge* is often referred to as 'Raphael's Bible'.<sup>20</sup> Like other illustrated Bibles published around the turn of the 16th century, the *Logge* vaults narrate the history of the chosen people, moving from Creation to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah, and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Raphael's inclusion of Old Testament figures was hardly unusual as the Creation and surrounding events were common subjects of art at that time. Raphael's program is unique however, in that 12 bays are devoted to the Old Testament while only one is assigned



Giovanni Ottaviani (engraver) with  
 Pietro Camporesi (architect) and  
 Gaetano Savorelli (designer) after Raphael,  
*Divisit lucem a Tenebris, appellavitq: lucem diem, et  
 tenebras noctem. Genes. Cap. I.* [He separated the  
 light from the darkness, He called the 'light' day  
 and the darkness He called 'night.' Genesis.  
 Chapter 1], plate I from *Prima e Seconda Parte delle  
 Logge Vaticane da Raffaello*, c.1772–1776,  
 engraving, image: 59.0 x 56.6 cm;  
 plate: 63.2 x 58.3 cm; sheet: 78.0 x 71.2 cm.  
 Reg. no. 1982.2018, gift of Mr J.L. Koskie, 1982,  
 Baillieu Library Print Collection,  
 University of Melbourne.

to the New Testament and features Jesus.<sup>21</sup> Around Raphael's fresco, visible in Ottaviani's engraving, is a lattice of coffer frames spanning the vaults which contain angels, the traditional bringers of tidings, who appear to welcome the scenes of the frescoes with exclamations of praise. Raphael's choir of angels is a clever device, both decorative and spiritually appropriate.<sup>22</sup> Just as God is described in Thomas Masterson's epistle as the 'architector of all things', placing the sun, moon and stars above 'in a vault or coverture of his worke',<sup>23</sup> Raphael poetically shows God creating the cosmos in the vault of his own creation.

The first bay of Raphael's *Logge* illustrates the first few passages of Genesis, with God the central performer in this opening act. In this painting, as reproduced in Ottaviani's print after Raphael, the figure of God is depicted in full mannerist pose, using arms and body to divide light and dark amongst the clouds. Literary sources known in the early Renaissance, such as St Gregory of Nazianzus, described God as a force whose 'swiftness of moving is called flying and his watchful care is called face'.<sup>24</sup> Thus Raphael could quite appropriately visualise God in human form in the act of creating the heavens. It was not really until the



beginning of the Renaissance that the figure of God could assume its own attributes and countenance, which usually consisted of a grey, flowing beard and garments as well as being more advanced in age than figures of Christ. The age gap between Christ

and the Father grows bigger as Christian art inevitably becomes more influenced by human realities; their features become less indistinguishable than in earlier Christian artworks.<sup>25</sup> While Renaissance representations of God usually have a consistent feature

(the divine figure as an old man), God's powerful actions are always more important than a realistic portrait within narrative images. Traditionally, God's right hand created the moon, also read as the Old Testament and with his left hand he created the sun, or the New Testament, which heralds the light of the Son of God.<sup>26</sup> Martin's figure in the *Creation of light* does not have the traditional arm placement but the sun and moon are in their orthodox positions in the sky.

Another series depicting the 'Creation of the world' is Johannes Sadeler the Elder's *Imago Bonitatis Illius*, produced in the second half of the 16th century, approximately 60 years after Raphael's frescoes in the Vatican *Logge*. The Sadelers were a large family of Flemish engravers. There are nine volumes of Sadeler engravings in the Baillieu Library Rare Books Collection which appear to have come from two different sources as seven volumes are bound and assembled differently from two others. The total nine volumes however, were purchased for the Library in 1962 from the prominent London print dealer Colnaghi's by the Society of Collectors on the recommendation of Professor Joseph Burke of the Fine Arts Department. The volumes were originally part of

the Syon House Print Library, which was sold by the Duke of Northumberland at Sotheby's in 1951. The Baillieu Library has one of the largest collections of Sadeler engravings comprising over 1,100 prints (although about 250 are duplicated and in a few cases triplicated).<sup>27</sup>

The volume relevant to this article contains prints by Johannes Sadeler the Elder. It was common for Flemish printmakers to engrave after the compositional designs of another artist; Sadeler made two currently known series of the Creation narrative after two artists. The Rare Books Collection at the Baillieu Library has one of these: the *Imago Bonitatis Illius* after the designs of Martin de Vos. It shows the Creation in a series of eight prints, including the title page.<sup>28</sup> Sadeler's *The creation of light* has parallels to Raphael's *God separates light from darkness* fresco in the Vatican *Logge*, with God floating on a cloud with arms motioning light and dark to divide. The blackness in Sadeler's print almost looks like waves of water and seems to be intentional, considering water plays such an integral part of the Genesis passage: '... and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said Let there be Light and

there was Light.'<sup>29</sup> Similarly in Martin's print *Creation of light*, narrow rivers can be seen under God's floating form.

Johannes Sadeler the Elder's print depicting the creation of the sun, moon and stars (see p. 41) comes later in the *Imago Bonitatis Illius* series than the plate depicting the creation of light. It has a double view into the distance on either side of the central figure of God, who is shown from behind, flying above the world, reminiscent of Raphael's *Creation of the sun and the moon* in the Vatican *Logge*.<sup>30</sup> In the centre foreground of Sadeler's print is a small hill upon which naturalistic and identifiable plants are growing—foxglove, poppy and daisy—while directly beneath God is a half-observed palm tree, indicating the eastern origins of Paradise.<sup>31</sup> A crescent moon sits in the right hand corner above the constellation of stars which runs along the upper plane, while the sun sits on the left side of the sky. Small streams and a waterfall run between mountainous terrain, again signifying the importance of water in the Creation story. Although various landscape styles are employed across the *Imago Bonitatis Illius* series, they are all distinctly Flemish rather than Italianate. This is apparent in the seemingly unrelated features of the

Johannes (Jan) Sadeler the Elder (engraver) after Martin de Vos, (*Creation of light*), c.1580–1590, plate I from the series *Imago Bonitatis Illius*, engraving, image: 18.5 x 25.5 cm; plate: 19.8 x 25.6 cm.  
 In *Works of Sadelers [after] de Vos. Vol I*, part of a nine-volume compilation probably assembled by the first Duchess of Northumberland, c.1576–1628. Gift of the Society of Collectors, 1962, Baillieu Library Rare Books Collection, University of Melbourne.

landscape, which include the Flemish preference for still life genre not previously seen in biblical scenes of Creation.<sup>32</sup> The symbols in the sky refer to the zodiac, which in the Renaissance was believed to relate to the spheres of planets and stars created by God in the cosmos. The zodiac features in many biblical illustrations of the Creation.

John Martin's mezzotint (*Creation of light*) seems therefore to be inspired not only by Milton's poetry, but by a lengthy pictorial tradition. Indeed Adolphe Didron, when discussing the long and complex history of artistic

representations of God in Christian iconography, significantly cites Raphael and Martin's figures as being particularly noteworthy, both investing 'him at length with a solemn and awe-inspiring physiognomy appropriate only to the Almighty Father and Creator'.<sup>33</sup> Johannes Sadeler the Elder's prints after Martin de Vos in the *Imago Bonitatis Illius* series, while distinctly Flemish, translate a prominent theological archetype and can be placed within the established tradition, where the figure of God is seen in separate and sequential acts of

the Creation. The inclusion of the zodiac in late 16th century engravings can be seen in the context of the Renaissance and thus European cosmography, where scientists, scholars and artists began to investigate the sky and visible universe, attempting to align it with the biblical account of Creation. This was an interesting time in history when scientific discovery and Christian belief entwined in scholarship and art. These prints which are all seemingly linked to an iconographic program of the Old Testament, are, importantly, not intended or designed to be a portrait of God but a representation of God doing a particular work—whether creating Adam and Eve, receiving gifts from Cain and Abel or creating day and night. While there were questions of whether God should be represented visually, images could be deemed acceptable and permissible if they conveyed key Christian beliefs and as long as they were not confused with the true presence of God. Recent investigations suggest that the figural motifs and compositions of Raphael's *Logge*, as seen in Ottaviani's reproductive print, reflect early Christian and medieval models, together with literary sources.<sup>34</sup> An image of God was more tied up with the controversy of how it was



understood by those who viewed it, rather than how it was used.<sup>35</sup> In the case of these prints in the Baillieu Library's collection, the artists were following a visual tradition, although at times controversial, where they could interpret and re-present the first and greatest creation—the universe.

Louisa Marks undertook an internship with the Baillieu Library Print Collection in 2008, under the aegis of the Cultural Collections Student Projects Program. During her time in Prints, she assisted with cataloguing, research and installing exhibitions. In 2008 Louisa also completed her Master of Art Curatorship which followed a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree. Her main interests are Roman art and architecture, 19th century art, artists of the Grand Tour and contemporary Australian prints. She plans to keep writing critical articles this year and to gain more curatorial experience.

#### Notes

- 1 Lloyd R. Bailey, *Genesis, Creation and creationism*, New York: Paulist Press, 1993, p. 1.
- 2 Robin Margaret Jensen, *Face to face: Portraits of the divine in early Christianity*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005, p. 16. This visible versus invisible God was the complex subject of much theological debate, but Christian art was still able to develop in the Christian catacombs in the early 3rd century.
- 3 S. Brent Plate, 'Icon: The image of Jesus Christ and Christian theology', in S. Brent Plate (ed.), *Religion, art and visual culture: A cross-cultural reader*, New York: Palgrave, 2002, p. 55.
- 4 Jensen, *Face to face*, p. 116.
- 5 Jensen, *Face to face*, p. 21. Jensen cites two epistles of Gregory the Great to the Bishop Serenus of Marseilles, which demonstrate Gregory's attitude to iconoclasm, criticising the bishop for banishing and destroying images in his diocese as they are instructive for the illiterate, yet praising him for his firm stance against adoration of idols.
- 6 Jensen, *Face to face*, pp. 23, 129; idolatry was often associated with paganism in Christian minds.
- 7 Jensen, *Face to face*, p. 23.
- 8 The earliest edition of *Paradise lost* held in the Special Collections, Baillieu Library, is John Milton, *Paradise lost*, London: R. Everingham, 1688. Donated by C.R. Ward-Ambler.
- 9 S.K. Heninger, *The cosmographical glass: Renaissance diagrams of the universe*, San Marino, California: Huntington Library, 1977, p. 19. Milton tries to deal with the truism that since God is infinite, there could be no matter nor anything else outside his being. His line 'Because I am who fill/ Infinity, nor vacuous the space' (book 7, lines 168–169, *Paradise lost*), was a heretical idea compared to the generally accepted Christian belief that God created the world *ex nihilo* or out of nothing.
- 10 Michael J. Campbell, *John Martin: Visionary printmaker*, [England]: Campbell Fine Art in association with York City Art Gallery, 1992, p. 57.
- 11 Campbell, *John Martin*, p. 57. See also p. 11: In the mezzotint process, the artist begins by tilting a curved, serrated tool called a rocker all over the plate in many directions. The rocker's teeth push up small tufts of metal from the surface, leaving the entire plate rough. If the plate were inked at this stage, the resulting impression would be entirely black, as the burrs hold all the ink to the plate. To create an image, the artist smooths certain areas by scraping and then burnishing. The areas of rough burr hold the ink and print black, whereas the burnished areas, which are smooth and recessed, do not hold ink, leaving the white of the paper to show. The partially smooth areas hold less ink and consequently produce varying tones of grey.
- 12 Campbell, *John Martin*, pp. 57–58.
- 13 Campbell, *John Martin*, p. 57.
- 14 Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian iconography: The history of Christian art in the Middle Ages*, translated by E.J. Millington, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1968, p. 210.
- 15 Campbell, *John Martin*, p. 57.
- 16 Quoted in Thomas Balston, *John Martin 1789–1854: His life and works*, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 1947, pp. 80–81.
- 17 *The Literary Gazette*, 16 April 1825, p. 251, quoted in Campbell, *John Martin*, p. 57.
- 18 Maria Rosa Cinquegrano, 'Giovanni Ottaviani incisore romano. Un artista dimenticato', *Grafica d'arte*, no. 61, January–March 2005, pp. 18–24. Ottaviani's set of prints after Raphael's *Logge Vaticane*, realised in collaboration with architect Pietro Camporesi and designer Gaetano Savorelli, were the works which made Ottaviani famous.
- 19 The Baillieu Library Print Collection has six prints by Ottaviani out of the full set, all illustrating various bays and frescoes of Raphael's *Logge*.
- 20 Bernice F. Davidson, *Raphael's Bible: A study of the Vatican Logge*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985, p. 4. See also Nicole Dacos, 'La Bible de Raphael', in *Le logge di Raffaello: maestro e bottega di fronte all'antico*, Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria, 1977.
- 21 Davidson, *Raphael's Bible*, p. 42. Such an unbalanced distribution has yet to be found elsewhere.
- 22 Davidson, *Raphael's Bible*, pp. 49–50. By having the angels frame the scenes of Creation, Raphael could cleverly avoid the tricky subject of when exactly they were created. The Book of Job (38: 4–7) says that choirs of angels joyfully greeted Creation. This is another paradox which would have intrigued Milton, for if nothing existed before Creation except God (according to Genesis), how could angels be present at Creation? And why doesn't Genesis describe their creation during the six days of God's work?
- 23 Thomas Masterson, *Third booke of arithmetike*, London, 1595, A2, quoted in Heninger, *The cosmographical glass*, p. 15.

Johannes (Jan) Sadeler the Elder (engraver)  
 after Martin de Vos, (*Creation of the sun,  
 moon and stars*), c.1580–1590, plate IIII (IV) from  
 the series *Imago Bonitatis Illius*,  
 engraving, image: 18.6 x 25.3 cm;  
 plate: 20.0 x 25.4 cm.  
 In *Works of Sadelers [after] de Vos. Vol I.*



24 Quoted in Davidson, *Raphael's Bible*, p. 48.

25 Didron, *Christian iconography*, pp. 217–219, 228–230.

26 Davidson, *Raphael's Bible*, p. 49.

27 Ruth Margaret Edquist, *The Sadeler family engravings: A critical and historical introduction to the engravings by members of the Sadeler family in the Print Collection of the Baillieu Library*, Master of Arts thesis, University of Melbourne, 1980, pp. 1–3.

28 The four series of 'Hermits' and the three on the Creation and the Early Life of Man, comprising *Imago Bonitatis Illius, Boni et Mali*

*Scientia and Bonorum et Malorum Consensio*, which number more than 100 plates, are all after de Vos' designs. All these series are found in a volume of Johannes Sadeler the Elder's engravings in the Rare Books Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library.

29 Gen. 1: 2–3, quoted in Campbell, *John Martin*, p. 124.

30 Edquist, *Sadeler family engravings*, pp. 178–179; as Edquist notes, Sadeler's God the Father is also reminiscent of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel figure of the Maker. Davidson, *Raphael's Bible*, p. 49 (footnote 39), suggests

that Raphael was also aware of Michelangelo's figure of God and was possibly trying to improve on his precedent. Raphael's frescoes can be viewed at <http://www.christusrex.org/www1/stanzas/L1-Loggia.html>.

31 Edquist, *Sadeler family engravings*, p. 179.

32 Edquist, *Sadeler family engravings*, p. 178.

33 Didron, *Christian iconography*, p. 221.

34 Davidson, *Raphael's Bible*, p. 3.

35 Jensen, *Face to face*, p. 21.