In his 1563 painting, *The Tower of Babel*, Pieter Bruegel presents the Old Testament gathering of might and power under the despotic leadership of a king, Nimrod, the ruler figure in the lower left corner (fig. 1). In Dante’s *Purgatorio* (12.34–36) Nimrod epitomizes pride: “I saw Nimrod at the foot of his great labor, as if bewildered; and there looking on were the people who were proud with him in Shinar.” While the Bible text (Genesis 11:1–9) does not mention Nimrod as instigator of the Tower of Babel, he does appear in *Jewish Antiquities* (1.4), by the Roman historian Flavius Josephus; there the plan to build the tower (called the Tower of “Babylon”) is ascribed to Nimrod, a giant who as first king of the Babylonians “transformed the state of affairs into tyranny.” The same tyrant is castigated in Saint Augustine’s *City of God* as the “proud and impious founder” of Babel, again identified as Babylon (16.4). Babel thus is posited as the polar opposite to the eternal city of God, equated with the Christian Church, so that its divine destruction marks the early assertion of the true faith.
This Babylon/Babel equation resounds as the place of ultimate sin in later prophets. Isaiah (13, 14, 21, 46–47) and Jeremiah (50–51) foretold destruction for Babylon and her king. In Revelation, sinful Babylon marks “a dwelling place of demons” (18:2), a place of incalculable riches, which will fall in final divine judgment. The merchants of Babylon will mourn her loss, “Alas, alas, that great city, in which all who had ships on the sea became rich by her wealth!” (Rev. 18:19).

A Tower of Babel–like construction also appears behind the allegorical figure (Hooverdicheyt) in Maarten van Heemskerck’s engraving of Pride, within the print cycle The Vicissitudes of Human Affairs (fig. 2). Once more the power of a despotic Old Testament king leads him into proud construction of a doomed building and to the inevitable dissolution of society itself.

Significantly, in his Vienna painting Bruegel represents the tower as being constructed on the express orders of the giant Nimrod. Yet the tower’s ultimate destruction is already suggested in Bruegel’s image: this enormous, ponderous structure is a castle built on sand; already it tilts, sinking into soggy marshland (typical of the Low Countries) at the lower left, just behind the imperious Nimrod.

Bruegel’s architectural plan with its arches and buttresses clearly derives from the ancient Roman megalithic structure, the Colosseum. This allusion to the Colosseum also implies eventual ruin, even as the tower is being built. Bruegel had seen the great Flavian monument during his own visit to Rome after 1551, but he also could rely upon 1550 etchings of it by his Antwerp publisher Hieronymus Cock. Bruegel’s Colosseum reference shows how, even during its construction, the Tower of Babel contained the seeds of its own ruination, anticipating its role in the eventual cause of the loss of human harmony and linguistic unity. Moreover, identifying Babylon with the Roman Empire, an allusion implicit in the book of Revelation (17:9), was made explicit by Augustine, who called Rome a “daughter of the former Babylon” (City of God, 18: 22).

At the edge of the great tower Bruegel shows a busy port city, gathering ships and their imported riches like his own hometown of Antwerp, even though this setting starkly contrasts with the location in Genesis: the “plain in the land of Shinar,” distant from any large body of water. Bruegel also incorporated local technology, the marvelous foot-powered crane of the port of Antwerp, pictured upon the flank of the tower for use as a winch to raise building materials from sea-level to the heights of new construction. Thus—opposite the figure of Nimrod—Bruegel emphasizes the town and port in the lower right corner, evoking that same passage from Revelation (18:19), where merchants and shipmasters bewail the fall of Babylon and the vengeance of God against her sin and wealth. Even if Bruegel had an agenda of criticizing monarchical despotism in the giant figure of Nimrod, potentially alluding to Spanish King Philip
II, he also surely conveys anxiety about Antwerp’s contemporary trade and burgeoning urban wealth by his link between shipping and the construction of the Tower of Babel.6

Simultaneously, Bruegel clearly refers to the contemporary Netherlands by featuring a flat expanse of land, extending to the left horizon behind and beyond the figure of Nimrod on his elevated foreground ledge. Closest to the tower at left and inside a gated city wall dwells a densely populated urban area, the other side of the port. The city has its own leisurely activities, fortifications, and church steeples, now dwarfed by the Tower of Babel. This inland sector, clearly constructed with the stepped gables and stone facades of contemporary Netherlandish architecture, sits along a river, more clearly visible beyond the walls at the left horizon. Outside the city wall one sees a characteristic windmill.

Although clearly the looming Tower of Babel dominates, Bruegel concentrated just as much skill and precision on his detailed painting of the quiet Flemish town. While this precision could partly derive from the artist’s desire to showcase his abilities as a miniaturist, juxtaposing the flat, local setting with the enormous structure reminiscent of the Roman Colosseum also functions to contrast them. The headlong building activity alongside the busy port that supplies it contrasts starkly to the quaint, if dense urban setting, where the only taller buildings are churches. This contrast also pits the collective against pure individual ambition and opposes the flat, surrounding land, natural to Flanders, to the unnatural presence of the tower—and to the unchecked economic aspirations of Antwerp as an international port city that Bruegel associates with it. Thus does Bruegel compare his native Low Countries in their flat countryside and tranquil settlements with the bustling modern port that abets construction of the evil Tower of Babel.

Furthermore, although the tower is far from finished, its new worldview has already taken root among the people, evidenced by the Flemish country-style residences perched perilously on the ledges of its multiple stories. Workers have constructed their own homes as retreats after each workday. However, these barracks are resolutely wedged beside and between columns, merging their very fabric and, consequently, the identities of their owners into the architecture of the tower.

The tower dominates totally in Bruegel’s later, smaller painted reprise, The Tower of Babel (fig. 3). Here the figure of Nimrod is eliminated entirely, and the colossal scale of the structure even more emphatically pierces the clouds. The tower in the Rotterdam painting stands at an even more complete stage of construction, with a full two-thirds of the structure finished. It dwarfs all who labor on the project and shadows an even wider Flemish setting.
Bruegel's man-made colossus looming high above the flat countryside shows the crucial importance of landscape in conveying the spiritual message of the biblical narrative. That very flatness contrasts with the previous half-century of Netherlandish landscape tradition, established by Joachim Patinir and later Antwerp painters, which drew a clear, close association between mountain heights and elevated spirituality. This association further underscores the heretical nature of the Tower of Babel, which strives in vain to imitate the realm of the divine, to reach above the clouds toward heaven but entirely through man-made effort. In fact, although built up using bricks unloaded from large, ocean-going vessels, the structure is also carved out, shaped from the core of a massive mountain. This incredible task seeks nothing less than to reverse nature and the natural order completely, at the command of an absolutist king who sought to rival God.

Such mountainous heights at the level of the highest clouds fully define the space of Bruegel's 1567 Conversion of Saint Paul (fig. 4). That work presents a military force on foot and horseback within a steep alpine pass, but here the subject remains obscure at first glance. The main impression consists of spatial contrasts: the mountain pass on the left reveals a vertiginous view down to a distant, verdant seacoast, from which antlike figures ascend. They move upward, leaving sunlight at the left horizon and advance toward dark storm clouds in peaks at the upper right. At the pivot of this procession, between light and dark, several large equestrian figures occupy the lower right corner of the picture. Their bright costumes and the prominent horse rumps identify them as cavalry officers bearing the squadron banner. Behind them sits a fuller cavalry force in contemporary armor. Bruegel also included an army of foot soldiers, many still slogging up the steep hillside. This combination of military units was characteristic of sixteenth-century armies (along with the added force of modern cannon inappropriate to a biblical depiction).

An army like this would have resembled the Spanish forces brought to the Netherlands by the Duke of Alba in 1567, the same year this painting was created. Ten thousand strong, they left Spain in April of 1567, and Alba led his army northward in June on what became known as "the Spanish road," marching across the Italian Alps through Piedmont and Savoy and into Brussels on August 22. No viewer of Bruegel's painting could have failed to associate Alba's force with both the alpine imagery and the contemporary depiction of soldiers. This military, however, intrudes as a crowded, negative force into those highland spaces normally reserved in Netherlandish landscapes for hermetic retreat and spiritual contemplation.

Bruegel's picture remains a religious subject, although the main figure must be discovered beneath the towering central evergreen trees. Clad in blue and surrounded by a tight circle of observers, foreshortened on the ground as he struggles before the horse from which he has just fallen, lies the tiny figure of Saint Paul (Acts 9: 1–8). As Saul, persecutor of Christians, the future Paul was journeying to Damascus to gather these religious heretics and convey them to Jerusalem for punishment at the hands of the high priest. According to the Gospels, a light shone on him,
and he heard the voice of Jesus as he fell to the ground. In Bruegel's painting that light, though faint, can be found above and to the left of the evergreens, subtly angled to intercept the prone figure of Saul. While his soldiers respond to his bodily accident, they fail to grasp the ultimate spiritual significance of this event. In the denouement, a temporarily blinded Saul is led on to Damascus by his men. This unfolding process closely echoes the visual experience of the viewer, who responds to the physical nature of the painted scene with wonder and appreciation, yet only later discovers the truly awe-inspiring biblical subject of conversion, camouflaged in its center.

Like the Old Testament destruction of the Tower of Babel, the New Testament conversion of Paul also involves a toppling over, a literal fall from the back of a horse, the very mark of chivalric honor, so that the scene also epitomizes the punishment of pride. Sudden, divine rebuke produces conversion in the name of faith—the transformation from pride to its opposite, humility, with Saul’s laying-out upon the ground, became a commonplace sermon on this event. Besides the punishing of pride, the story of the conversion of Saint Paul stresses the importance of personal recognition, even revelation, to "turn around" (the etymology of the term "con-version") a potential persecutor so that he changes direction.

Such ideas could have proved relevant to the current local representative of perceived tyranny, Alba. But Bruegel's more general awareness of the biblical event’s significance also led him to emphasize its symbolic spatial dimension, prompting him to follow Netherlandish landscape precedents in relocating this spiritual event to the mountains. Certainly distinctive is Bruegel's decision to stage Saint Paul's moment of conversion within an alpine setting. Of course, the artist had already obtained direct experience of the Alps on his round-trip journey to Italy in the early 1550s. Karel Van Mander's 1604 biography asserts that he "had swallowed all the mountains and rocks and spat them out again, on to his canvases and panels." Concerning the meaning of this choice, we recall that biblical mountains expressly denote sites for divine revelation: Mount Sinai for divine contact with the people of Israel or Mount Tabor for the Transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36).

The spiritual nature of highland spaces was a theme continued by many writers, from Augustine to Petrarch. In the first letter of the fourth book of his Le Familiari, Petrarch recounts his ascent of the highest peak in Provence, Mont Ventoux, interspersed with moments of meditation on his moral shortcomings throughout his meandering journey to the top. One pictorial precedent explicitly contrasts spiritual mountains with sinful flatlands. Lucas van Leyden had previously featured another scene of discovery, his small triptych with the Adoration of the Golden Calf (fig. 5). Here the viewer must peer past debauching Israelites in the foreground, beyond their idolatrous rites with the Golden Calf in the middle ground, to find the divine within a hovering cloud atop Mount Sinai, speaking to the lone figure of Moses in the upper background. Here, too, images of pride and sensuality in the lowlands contrast with true spirituality and personal humility before the Lord by a kneeling Moses on the heights. Landscapes painted by Joachim Patinir in Antwerp after 1515 also show highlands to suggest the commonplace notion of hardship and spiritual trial in the "wilderness," just as both literary and visual allegory traditionally associate steepness with the path of virtue, as opposed to the easier flat path of pleasure.
Indeed, Bruegel's *Conversion of Saint Paul* can be understood as the very inversion of his *Tower of Babel*. In the former, a vertiginous view from mountainous heights provides the perfect setting for Paul's spiritual revelation and his direct contact with the divine, as well as the subjugation of his former pride. In the latter, Nimrod's elevated view over the level worldly plains and busy seaport highlights his vainglory in substituting the man-made construction of artificial heights for the real clouds of heaven.

One religious print from Bruegel's *Large Landscapes* cycle, *Way to Emmaus (Euntes in Emaus)*, conforms to the compositional structure of earlier Bruegel landscape drawings. Its series of levels descend from a corner elevation, punctuated by tall, spreading trees that shelter the main figures, here a trio of wanderers dressed in pilgrim costumes (fig. 6). This print offers little indication of its serious religious significance except for the title and a subtle circular halo around the head of the central figure, seen only from behind and placed between two unidentified companions in profile. Like the eventual discovery of Paul's conversion within Bruegel's alpine scene, here the viewer may not at first realize that these three figures actually enact a Gospel episode after the Resurrection (Luke 24:13–35). According to the story, two apostles traveled alongside the resurrected Jesus but failed to recognize him while they were on the road; only afterward, when they broke bread together in an inn, did they suddenly perceive his true identity, whereupon he vanished. In similar fashion, the perceptive viewer is expected to discern the true identity of these wayfarers, particularly the haloed Jesus, and to experience a revelation akin to that of his apostle companions. Here, too, the basic process of true spiritual seeing contrasts with the worldly sensations of the pilgrims on their route. When the viewer attempts to follow the pilgrims’ path, two large logs block the way behind them, indicating that the route to discovery is neither clear nor easy.

Thus prolonged visual discernment is connected to spiritual revelation. It requires insight to “see” truly. This process of thoughtful viewing has a history, especially in landscape painting, where marginal or obscure motifs challenge the viewer not to take what is seen at face value but rather to see through one's initial visual perception to discern a deeper meaning. Bruegel's *Emmaus* print, however, does not depend upon contrasting highlands and lowlands; rather, it establishes the potential spiritual significance of even a humble countryside setting (which Bruegel would later explore, when he situated a number of religious events in contemporary Flemish village settings, such as his 1566 *Census at Bethlehem* in Brussels).

In similar fashion, Bruegel’s large 1566 painting *The Preaching of Saint John the Baptist* (fig. 7) presents a crowded human vista of a diverse population at the edge of a forest clearing, which also provides the denotation of a wilderness retreat for spiritual messages. All these listeners hear the sermon of the saint, the last prophet, and the “voice crying in the wilderness” (John 1:23; Matthew 3:1–6). This Bruegel image was later copied by both of the artist’s sons, Pieter the Younger and Jan Brueghel. This vivid image of the biblical sermon by the Baptist would have had...
its own topicality for Antwerp viewers in 1566, when Calvinist “hedge preachers” met large crowds outside the city limits. But it does not necessarily signal Bruegel’s own sympathies with Calvinism; after all, the artist was buried in a Catholic tomb in Notre-Dame de la Chapelle in Brussels and commemorated there by his son Jan, who worked for the Catholic regents of Flanders, Archdukes Albert and Isabella.

Figure 7. Pieter Bruegel, The Preaching of Saint John the Baptist, 1566, oil on wood, 95 x 160.5 cm.
Budapest, Szépmûvészeti Mûzeum, inv. no. 51.2829 (artwork in the public domain)

Dressed in simple brown robes, the Baptist stands at the top center of the expanse, a small figure immersed in the crowd. Positioned at the base of two converging tall tree trunks he faces the viewer and gestures while enveloped by a crowd of listeners, many seen from behind. Their range of responses—rapt attention, bored distraction, sleeping—resembles those of the congregation within a church space of Bruegel’s earlier print design Faith (1559; Amsterdam), as well as earlier representations of the subject of the Preaching Baptist by such artists as Herri met de Bles.

Closest to the viewer in the foreground sits a conventional pilgrim with a staff and hat covered with badges, including the scallop of Saint James (Santiago de Compostela), plus the X-shaped cross of Saint Anthony. Beside this pious figure sits a vagrant not known for piety: a gypsy (“Egyptian”) woman with her characteristic flat round hat. She and her bearded, long-haired, fortune-telling mate denote the location as the Holy Land. To the left of the foreground tree a woman with a drinking-can on her back appears with a standing figure wearing a distinctly Ottoman turban. Additionally, a pair of monks in their robes stands near the tree at the right behind a soldier. Clearly the image means to proclaim the universality of the Gospel message, addressed to both exotic and domestic audiences, committed Christians and pagans alike. The two gypsy figures dissolve the boundary between past and present, between hedge-preaching in the ancient Holy Land and in the Netherlands in 1566.

The painting poses a further question of discernment for the viewer—how, amidst this sea of faces, to find figure of John the Baptist or the even more obscure figure of Jesus, who, dressed in bluish robes, stands at right, just beyond the extended left arm of the Baptist. Not only is it difficult to discover these key figures within the picture, but it is nearly impossible to see the Baptism event, a diminutive scene of crowd activity in the haze at the bend of the river, just above the congregation and below the horizon. Like earlier sixteenth-century painters of this religious subject in a landscape, chiefly Joachim Patinir and Herri met de Bles, Bruegel located his spiritual message in an obscurity that challenges ordinary sense perception.

Bruegel thus asserts the invisible nature of spiritual matters by making their representation difficult to find. The work required for discovery by a discerning viewer, to provide deeper understanding of what is represented, parallels the mental process of devotional exercise by the faithful and the resulting spiritual revelation. However, these exercises, both in visual analysis and in Christian devotion, are consistent with the diligence required from the apostles when Jesus took up his most basic form of teaching—the parable.

Understood as a comparison, parables are short fictional narratives, generally referring to something that might occur naturally but which conveys spiritual and moral meaning. Said another way, they comprise plausible stories that can be taken at face value and still make sense; but they can be further mined metaphorically for religious content in an act of spiritual discernment.
In this light, it is significant that one of Bruegel's first paintings, certainly his first extant painted landscape, represents the *Parable of the Sower* (fig. 8). That Bruegel depicted a parable in his first large-scale landscape painting suggests how much the artist considered his plausible representation of the land and the life on it as a metaphor for universal truths and as a location for spiritual revelation. The landscape layout of the *Parable of the Sower* closely accords with the earlier *Rustic Care* (*Solicitudo Rustica*) from the engraved *Large Landscapes*. Beneath a pair of slender, curving trees, the main figure, a farmer, is busy broadcasting seeds across the left foreground. A large tree stump occupies the center foreground, where stones are clearly visible in the soil. The main angle of viewing runs from the sower at the lower left corner to high mountain crests in the upper right distance, above a wide river. Here, too, the intermediate landscape shows a Flemish village, albeit one distributed upon an uncharacteristic hillside topography rather than on local flatlands. Near the center of the image stands a church steeple. Perhaps the most unusual detail is an indistinct crowd scene across the river.

In conjunction with the sower the presence of the crowd unlocks the meaning of this image, indicating that Bruegel's landscape space serves as the meaningful setting for a parable but also as the basic image for all parables, whether fallow or fertile. Although the figure of Jesus cannot be recognized on the riverbank (compare the tiny scene of his baptism in the *Preaching of Saint John the Baptist*), partly owing to the painting's damaged condition, it is clear that someone is delivering a speech beside a boat. This suggests that this image represents the Sea of Galilee and the occasion of Jesus's very first parable (Matthew 13:1–23), delivered "beside the sea" to great crowds as Jesus "got into a boat and sat there, and the whole crowd stood on the beach." (13:2)

Like all parables, this lesson emerges through homely metaphors. It uses the image of a sower, whose seeds were partly devoured by birds, partly fruitless when they fell upon stony soil or were choked by thorns, and partly successful when they found fertile soil. Brilliantly, therefore, Bruegel selected Jesus's first parable as the subject for his own inaugural landscape painting, a work that planted the seed for his own affinity with landscape. This significant choice surely indicates a parallel between painting and parable that goes beyond one simply being the subject of another.

The story's moral reveals that sermons and the word of God generally are lost on unperceptive listeners (13:13), but they work effectively with anyone "who hears the word and understands it" (13:23). Thus a parable itself is likely to be understood only by some small portion of its audience. Bruegel's message in his first painted landscape applies this same hermeneutic process to the very act of viewing. In later Bruegel pictures, the viewer's task is to discern the spiritual meaning of a subject behind its seemingly prosaic, everyday appearance. Like the small figures in the *Conversion of Saint Paul* and the *Preaching of John the Baptist*, this background gathering around Christ at the Sea of Galilee provides the necessary context for understanding this image as another religious subject, not just a landscape with incidental figures. That this is Christ's Sower, with that figure's deeper meaning, offers a potential parallel to seeing the artist himself as a fashioner of visual parables and suggests that Bruegel also hid significance in his other pictures. Recognition of that religious content, perhaps even with the force of a revelation, in a work that at first sight...
seems more like the depiction of a local Flemish village or landscape remains a necessary pictorial skill for a perceptive viewer seeking to understand much in the artist’s oeuvre.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This essay is dedicated to my long-time colleague and friend, who first taught us to see Dutch pastoral as a meaningful intellectual construct and has taught us all so much more since then.

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15 Reindert Leonard Falkenburg, *Joachim Patinir: Landscape as an Image of the Pilgrimage of Life*, trans. Michael Hoyle (Amsterdam, 1986), 78–82, 91–96, 101–2. This allegorical imagery already appears in Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Hercules* (B.73), where the hero assists Virtue in her battle of lust before a *paysage moralisée*—an image of the “castle of virtue” atop a hill in the left background, in contrast to the river valley of pleasure at the right horizon.


19 A similar universalism with even more varied, exotic figures in costume appears in Rembrandt's grisaille, *The Preaching of Saint John the Baptist* (ca. 1634; Berlin, Staatliche Museen); see Shelly Perlove and Larry Silver, *Rembrandt’s Faith* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009), 264–69.

20 One might compare late-medieval devotional practices and even the Spiritual Exercises of Loyola. See Kathryn Rudy, *Virtual Pilgrimages in the Convent: Imagining Jerusalem in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout; Brepols, 2011); Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *Sensuous Worship: Jesuits and the Art of the Early Catholic Reformation in Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 29–53.

Recommended Citation: Larry Silver, “Pieter Bruegel’s Symbolic Highlands in the Lowlands,” *Midwestern Arcadia: Essays in Honor of Alison Kettering* (2015) DOI: 10.18277/makf.2015.01