

By Ruth Reneer

*I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in  
darkness, but shall have the light of life.*

John 8:12

James Tissot found a niche in ~~19~~nineteenth-century France as a painter of elaborate fashion and high-sociality. His ability to create believable textural effects made him well suited for painting the fine materials and fabrics of the Parisian elite. In the midst of a successful career in Paris, political turmoil drove Tissot to London, where his success as an upper-class genre painter continued. While in London, darkness suddenly enveloped the artist's happy life when tuberculosis killed the woman he loved. He never truly recovered from this traumatic experience. However, perhaps this loss was an essential step toward his spiritual reconversion four years later. A significant spiritual experience in the Church of St. Sulpice in Paris drew Tissot back to his upbringing in the Roman Catholic Church. This spiritual awakening inspired Tissot to begin a *Life of Christ* series consisting of 365 watercolor illustrations. He gave his life completely to this project and traveled to the Holy Land to ~~study~~carefully ~~study~~ the setting of the life of Christ. He worked to bring the viewer a realistic and inspiring view of Jesus Christ and the events of his life. One painting in this series, *Christ on the Mountain* (Fig. 1), is a particularly poignant example of Tissot's ability to teach doctrine through imagery.

Most of the scholarship on Tissot focuses on the earlier years of his career. Few scholars seem to recognize the importance of his later years and his work as a religious artist. Those who do address his religious art generally explore the series as a whole and focus on few individual works. *Christ on the Mountain* (or *Jesus Goes Up Alone onto a Mountain to Pray*) is not commonly used in these analyses, but I believe there is much to be learned from this painting in

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the way it relates to Christ's teachings in John 8:12. ~~In t~~This paper I intend to will show explain how the messages in John 8:12 are illustrated in *Christ on the Mountain*. This example of Tissot's religious work shows how he combined naturalism with supernatural details to create a believable yet reverent view of Christ. As we explore this balance of natural and supernatural, our close study of the painting will allow Christ's teachings in John 8:12 to unfold: "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Each aspect of this verse—namely, Christ as the Light of the ~~w~~World, the viewer/reader not walking in darkness, and the viewer/reader receiving the light of life—is magnified by the composition and chiaroscuro of this image. Through this journey, ~~I~~we will connect the verbal and visual messages in John 8:12 and *Christ on the Mountain*.

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### **An Artist's Interpretation: Both Human and Divine**

Tissot's religious works show an interesting blend of naturalism and supernaturalism. Although many of Tissot's contemporaries were experimenting with Impressionism, which moved away from naturalism and realistic details, Tissot's decision to apply naturalism is instrumental in the believability and impact of his spiritual paintings. James C. Livingston wrote a book on the development of religious thought during the Victorian Era. In this book, he discusses the ever-increasing importance of scientific evidence and reasoning. He shows how rationalism and scientific reasoning were preferred over the dogmatism of theology. Although religion and God remained important, there was an increasing need to understand ~~the~~ science as proof of ~~the~~ theology.<sup>1</sup> The years covered by Livingston (1860–1910) overlap with the time that Tissot spent in England (1871–~~1882~~). Although at this time in his life and career Tisso~~the~~ was not active religiously, he doubtless would have been exposed to the changing attitude toward science and religion. This attitude is reflected in the way he deals with religious topics later in his career. As

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can be seen in the realistic details of *Christ on the Mountain*, Tissot used naturalism as a scientific support for his spiritual subject matter. He balanced the supernatural with carefully natural, realistic, and tangible details in order to provide logical and visual evidence of the spiritual elements. This attention to naturalistic detail reflected the Victorian relationship between science and theology. Realistic detail was of such great importance to Tissot that he spent many months studying the people, places, and culture of the Holy Land. He sought to portray a realistic Christ and realistic Bible scenes by studying and staying true to naturalistic details. Tissot's religious paintings thus provided rational and scientific support to religious themes through a rational and scientific visual interpretation.

Although Tissot's religious works are full of naturalistic detail, the themes still reflect a sense of ~~spiritualism~~ that does not classify as rational. In John Henry Hughes's article about Tissot's contribution to religious art, he showed how Tissot combined realism and idealism in his images of Christ. Compared to earlier representations ~~which that~~ often showed Christ as weak and effeminate, Tissot gives us a real man. He is a real person first and, in addition, he is divine.<sup>2</sup> *Christ on the Mountain* provides such a portrayal of Christ. A Jewish man stands on the peak of a mountain. His features are not over-dramatized. He is simply a real man standing on a real mountain. Yet despite the naturalism of his physical features, we know that this is Christ. His stance and demeanor suggest divinity, as does the idealized use of light. There is enough of the divine in his kingly and confident posture to convince us that this man is also a god. Hughes argued that the realism of Tissot's Christ allows viewers to relate to his humanness, while the idealism allows them to appreciate his divinity.<sup>3</sup> ~~I would~~ We can further argue that the realism provides evidence for the reality of this man, while the idealism proves that he is more than man. Tissot's combined use of naturalism and idealism appeals both to the scientific and logical

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demands of society and to the ability of each viewer to personally relate and admiringly worship. Through this combination, Tissot makes the scriptural accounts of Christ come alive, including the words of Christ in John 8:12.

### **Introducing John 8:12**

Setting the scene for John 8:12 requires some knowledge of Jewish holiday traditions. This scene opens on the day after the Feast of ~~the~~ Tabernacles—the “greatest and most joyful of all” the feasts. Eight days long and full of sacrifices, candelabra, and willow-~~tree~~ canopies, the Feast of ~~the~~ Tabernacles celebrated the children of Israel traveling in the wilderness and the Jew-~~s~~’ annual gathering of crops.<sup>4</sup> Significant to John 8:12 was the use of candelabra during this feast.

Throughout the celebration, the temple courts were illuminated by four golden candelabras.

These enormous candelabras (approximately ~~seventy-three~~73 feet tall) gave light to the Jews as they celebrated through the night and into the early morning. And of course they glowed with religious significance, too—a symbol of Israel, the light that shines for those walking in darkness.<sup>5</sup> The brilliance of this light would have been fresh in the memories of those who gathered around Christ as he gave this bold declaration: “I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.” Immediately the Pharisees attacked the validity of his statement. “Thou bearest record of thyself,” they said. “Thy record is not true.” They claimed that they need not accept one person’s witness of himself. But Christ refuted this by explaining, “Though I bear record of myself, yet my record is true. . . . It is also written in your law, that the testimony of two men is true. I am one that bear witness of myself, and the Father that sent me beareth witness of me.” (John 8:12–14, 17–18). By appealing to their own law, with which they would have been familiar, Christ proved the validity of his statement. As the Pharisees then faced the decision to accept or reject Christ as the ~~l~~ight of the

~~W~~World, each of us must do the same. The Pharisees continued to find fault and chose to reject Christ as the light that would bring them out of darkness. But the record remains. The statement is as bold now as it was then. The soul-searching decision must still be made. The painting of *Christ on the Mountain* indicates that Tissot chose to accept Christ as the Light of the ~~W~~World. His reconversion ~~led~~ not only led to a decision to accept Christ, but also inspired him to share his faith visually through Biblical images. Although there is no evidence that *Christ on the Mountain* was directly inspired by John 8:12, each aspect of Christ's statement is exemplified in this painting. Through a natural and supernatural portrayal of Christ on the mountain, Tissot's painting shows Christ as the Light of the ~~W~~World. It illustrates not needing to walk in darkness if we choose to follow him. And it makes reference to the gift of the light of life. These references can be seen through Tissot's use of composition and chiaroscuro throughout the painting. It is these elements and their effect that ~~I wish to~~ we will further explore.

### **The Light of the World**

Light. This word has associations with knowledge, understanding, safety, guidance, happiness, comfort, and warmth. Christ declared himself the "light of the world." All who have spent time in this world know that darkness runs rampant—the darkness of evil, danger, sorrow, fear, and ignorance. Nations, communities, and individuals wonder where to turn for solace from these elements of darkness. In John 8:12, Christ gives us the answer. He tells us to turn to him.

*Christ on the Mountain* illustrates this answer. Tissot places Christ on the top of a mountain. Compositionally, he is placed in the top third of the painting, towering majestically over the mountain pathway that fills the bottom two-thirds. His feet stand firmly above the line of the horizon, giving the sense that he is standing on a grand peak from which he can see far and wide. The world lies beneath him—the world of darkness. Tissot deliberately placed Christ in a

nocturnal setting. If the sun were shining, it would distract from the true Light of the World standing on the mountain. But the speckled glow of the stars and the thin sliver of the moon are insignificant compared to the figure standing on the peak and radiating light. As Christ stands against the darkness of the sky, he shines as a beacon of light to the world. His position allows him to look down on the world while also allowing the world to look up at him. Standing on the solidly naturalistic mountain, Christ radiates as a visual testimony that he is the Light of the World.

The chiaroscuro, or light and shadow, reflects Tissot's combined use of naturalism and supernaturalism. As a traditional symbol of divinity and truth, light has historically played an important role in religious painting. Early images of Christ often include a halo circling his head, indicating his divinity. This tradition lasted many centuries and continues to be applied, if less overtly, in modern portrayals of Christ. An example of this tradition can be found in Cimabue's *Crucifix* (c. 1270), found in the Church of San Domenico, Arezzo, Italy (Fig. 2). The drama of this imagedepiction is furthered by the gold-leafed halo behind Christ's head.<sup>6</sup> The light reflected by the gold leaf and represented by the halo emphasizes Christ's divinity even at this moment of death. The light is an essential aspect of the image. Although the unrealistic and stylized nature of halos caused artists to eventually abandon the tradition, the use of light remained important~~ee~~. Artists began using light to suggest a more natural-looking halo, such as in Carl Bloch's *Christus Consolator* (1884) in Sweden (Fig. 3). In this image there is still a glow around Christ's head, but the glow blends into the blue sky. Although clearly a sign of divinity, the halo-type glow emanates as a more natural light. Other artists have discarded the halo completely, but continue to use light to indicate divinity. Peter Paul Rubens used light to highlight Christ's body in his *Descent from the Cross* (1612–1614; Fig. 4). The light source is unclear, but the light rests

naturally on his body and on the cloth behind him. The uncertainty of the light source hints at Christ's divinity. No candle, torch, or star illuminates the sacred body. The glow draws the viewer's eye to Christ and indicates that this is no common man being taken down from a cross—this man is divine, and his divinity shows in the use of light. Tissot would have been familiar with this tradition of light when he began his own series of Christ paintings. He continued and added to this traditional use of light in his depiction of Christ on the Mountain.

The Christ in this image is different from the other examples we have looked at in terms of lighting. He has no distinct halo. The darkness of the sky continues all the way to his figure. Like Rubens, Tissot omits a clear and naturalistic light source. But, unlike Rubens, he places the light behind Christ rather than in front. Perhaps this gives the light a more natural feel. It's nighttime. The world is dark on top of this mountain. No fire or torch lights the way. Christ's figure and face are in shadow, but the shadow isn't deep. It's gently threatened by the light coming from beneath Christ and lighting up his whole figure. The white light suggests moonlight or starlight, but the stars, though numerous, aren't very bright and the moon is barely a sliver. It's ridiculous to imagine that a moon so small could produce a light as strong as the light resting on Christ. This juxtaposition of realistic, yet unrealistic lighting suggests highlights Christ as a man who, though real and human, is also truly divine. He is clearly the climax of the night, both in the height of his position and in the light surrounding his figure. He stands confident in his role as the Light of the wWorld.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, gave two examples of how Christ is the Light of the wWorld: (1) “Because hHe is the source of the light which ‘proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space’ (D&C 88:12),” and (2) “Because hHis example and his teachings illuminate the path we should walk to return to the presence of

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our Father in Heaven.”<sup>7</sup> I’m not sure how much of this doctrine Tissot understood when he painted *Christ on the Mountain*. However, the beauty of art lies in its power to relate something personal to the viewer beyond the artist’s initial intent. Tissot shared his testimony of Christ through visual interpretations of his Savior. Through his abilities as an artist, he shared that testimony with contemporary viewers and continues to share it with viewers today. But each viewer brings a fresh interpretation that includes his or her own knowledge, experiences, and belief. For this reason, we are able to see in Tissot’s image doctrines taught nearly one hundred years after his death. *Christ on the Mountain* shows Christ as the source of light—that light which “proceedeth forth from the presence of God to fill the immensity of space.” We see this in the lack of any other natural light source. Thus, the light surrounding Christ supports Elder Oaks’s first point. The second example given by Elder Oaks is illustrated in a further analysis of *Christ on the Mountain* in relation to John 8:12.

### Walking in Darkness

“The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” (Isaiah 9:2). Isaiah uses verbal chiaroscuro to describe the influence of Christ upon the people. In a similar way, Tissot’s contrast of light and dark illustrates Christ as the **L**ight of the **W**orld. The light of Christ is contrasted with ~~the darkness of~~ the mountainous path—a path the viewer would travel in darkness if not for his light illuminating the steps. Life is easily related to a path. We walk through life as through a long journey with ups and downs, storms and sunshine, deserts and flowers. Parts of the journey are difficult and miserable, but those parts make us stronger and help us better appreciate the moments of beauty and peace along the way. Prophets and apostles often speak of paths as an analogy for the direction of one’s life. Isaiah uses this concept often ([see Isaiah](#): 2:3; 42:16), as

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do Paul ([see Hebrews- 12:13](#)), Nephi ([see 1 Nephi- 16:5; 2 Nephi- 31:9, 18](#)), King Benjamin ([see Mosiah 2:36](#)), Alma ([see Alma 7:19](#)), Samuel the Lamanite ([see Helaman- 15:5](#)), and Elder Oaks.

The path of life can often seem draped in shadow. The darkness of despair or the mist of uncertainty can make it difficult to proceed confidently through the twists and turns along the path. Many people walk in darkness. ~~However,~~ Christ ~~promises~~~~declares~~ that, as the ~~H~~light of the ~~w~~World, if people will follow him, they “shall not walk in darkness.” The path will be made clear. This concept is illustrated in *Christ on the Mountain*. Christ stands at the summit, shedding forth light on the dark path below him. The deep shadows of the path attest to the darkness of the night. ~~The path looks dangerous—it consists of uneven steps and sharp drops off the edge. It does not look like an easy path to travel in the dark.~~ However, the mountain is also highlighted by areas of great light. The chiaroscuro is natural enough to give the sense of a real mountain at night under the light of a brilliant night sky, ~~yet~~~~But~~ the night sky given in the painting could never produce such light on the mountain. The stars twinkle daintily but not brightly. And the moon is still that slim sliver capable of casting very little light. So how is the path being lit? By the ~~H~~light of the ~~w~~World, even Jesus Christ. ~~This path looks dangerous. It consists of uneven steps and sharp drops off the edge. It does not look like an easy path to travel in the dark.~~ ~~However,~~ ~~a~~As Christ illuminates the uneven steps and the dangerous areas to be avoided, the path becomes a manageable journey. ~~As Christ illuminates the path in Tissot’s painting, the viewer is reminded to allow Christ to illuminate his or her own uneven path. As the light of the world, he promises that all who “followeth me shall not walk in darkness.” The Savior stands as a beacon to those who follow the path, inviting all to come unto him and not walk in darkness. This doctrine is visually represented here and the viewer must decide whether or not to accept this doctrine, follow Christ, and walk in his light.~~

However, Christ cannot force anybody to follow the path that he has lit. As Elder Oaks taught, Jesus Christ's example and teachings is the light of the world; "because his example and his teachings illuminate the path we *should* walk to return to the presence of our Father in Heaven." (emphasis added). Tissot's gives us a visual version of that path and his composition makes this a personal journey, reminding the viewer of the role of agency in this process. In the painting of Christ on the mountain, ~~the~~ viewer is placed at the bottom of the path. Looking up, Christ is standing at the end of the journey, lighting the way and giving purpose to the path. ~~Standing as a beacon to those who choose to follow the path, Christ invites all to follow him and not walk in darkness.~~ There are certainly other mountains and paths in the surrounding area that could be traveled instead. But this is the path that is lit, and this is the path with the promise of eternal life. As the eye follows the path up to the figure of Christ, each viewer must decide if that is the path he or she they will follow in life. Through the dramatic composition and chiaroscuro, Tissot makes it clear that Christ is the Light of the World and that those who choose to follow him will not walk in darkness—but they must make the choice. Through similar tactics, he also refers the viewer to the promised gift of "the light of life."

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### **The Light of Everlasting Life**

When Christ promises life, he means more than our current life in mortality. The life Christ promises is eternal. "For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man—" (Moses 1:30). Christ provides the potential of immortality and eternal life to all who have lived, are living, and ever will live on the earth. I believe he was referring to the promise of eternal life when he declared, "He that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life." Not only will we not walk in darkness if we choose to follow him, but we will also be given the light of life. That light of life is available at the end of the

path. That light of life is our ultimate goal. Eternal life goes beyond immortality. Immortality is a life without death, and everyone will be resurrected to immortality. Eternal life is reserved for those who have followed Christ and who desire to be with him and live *his* kind of life for all eternity. This life is full of eternal light, the same light that reflects off Christ as he stands atop the mountain. Tissot references the gift of eternal life in his portrayal of *Christ on the Mountain*.

The contrast of light and darkness that we have already looked at can be compared to the light of life and the darkness of death. The light emanating from Christ overcomes and dispels the darkness of this nighttime scene. Likewise, the ~~R~~esurrection of Christ overcame and dispelled the power of death over all of God's children. Because Christ was resurrected, we too will experience a triumph over death. Through his Atonement, all men and women will overcome physical death and have the opportunity to overcome spiritual death. ~~Through his Atonement, all men and women have the opportunity to overcome spiritual death.~~ As we overcome physical and spiritual death, we attain the promised gift of the light of life. Tissot's use of chiaroscuro provides a visual representation of Christ's promise of the light of life to all who choose to follow him.

Tissot's use of composition also highlights this doctrine. We have addressed Christ's position at the top of the mountain and the way that he towers majestically over the surrounding area and the viewer. We have not yet looked at the way that he is standing. His pose is confident, humble, and majestic. He holds his arms out and looks up as though in communion with the Father. His outstretched arms reflect the iconic imagery of Christ on the cross. The use of a cross in Christian art began as early as the second century, although depictions of Christ on the cross were not seen until the fifth century.<sup>8</sup> The image of the cross has conveyed messages of deliverance and salvation from its earliest use through the modern day.<sup>9</sup> This message is

portrayed in *Christ on the Mountain* as Christ stands in a pose that references the cross on which his mortal life will end. His crucifixion made it possible for him to live again and, because of him, we will also live again. The significance of his outstretched arms doubles not only as a reference to the cross and but also as a welcoming gesture inviting all to come unto him. He invites all to follow him, walk not in darkness, and receive the gift of the light of life. Tissot's use of chiaroscuro and composition provides us with a visual representation of Christ's powerful message.

### **The Man on the Mountain**

Who is this Man on the mountain? This is Christ, the Light of world. But his light is not simply for the world as a whole—his light shines for the individual. His promise is to the one. He didn't say "everyone" or "people" or "that crowd over there." His promise was directed to the singular: "he [or she]." Each individual who chooses to accept Christ as the Light of the world and follow him shall not walk in darkness. That individual can follow Christ's light until he or she receives eternal life. This doctrine is taught powerfully in Tissot's painting of *Christ on the Mountain*, through his use of chiaroscuro and composition. As Christ stands atop that mountain peak, human and divine, his light invites all men and women to act on the principles taught in John 8:12. He calls to me; he calls to you. Let us heed that call and follow him.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See James C. Livingston, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: Challenges and Reconceptions* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 2, 33.

<sup>2</sup>See John Henry Hughes, “Tissot’s Contribution to Religious Art,” *Brush and Pencil* 10, no. 6 (1902): 367. Accessed October 22, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25505796>.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* See Hughes, “Tissot’s Contribution to Religious Art,” 368.

<sup>4</sup>“Feasts.” *Bible Dictionary*. “Feasts.” (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1989).

<sup>5</sup>See “John 5–7,” in *New Testament Student Manual* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2014), 217–24, ch 23.

<sup>6</sup>See Richard Harries, *The Passion in Art* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate Limited, 2004), 66, 69.

<sup>7</sup>Dallin H. Oaks, “The Light and Life of the World,” *Ensign*, November 1987: 63–64.

<sup>8</sup>See Richard Harries, *The Passion in Art* (Aldershot: Ashgate Limited, 2004), 1, 11.

<sup>9</sup>See *Ibid.* Harries, *Passion in Art*, 1.

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