

Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling is history's greatest artwork — but what does it actually mean? Well, these are no ordinary Bible scenes. And there's one key detail that everyone ignored for centuries...
(thread) 🧵



Man's greatest painting was made not by a painter, but a sculptor. Michelangelo was primarily a sculptor in 1508, when the Pope twisted his arm into adorning the chapel ceiling. He had never completed a fresco before...



That is evident in the 343 figures that look like they were "sculpted" onto the ceiling — muscular, powerful forms that borrowed from classical sculpture. So what did he actually paint up there?

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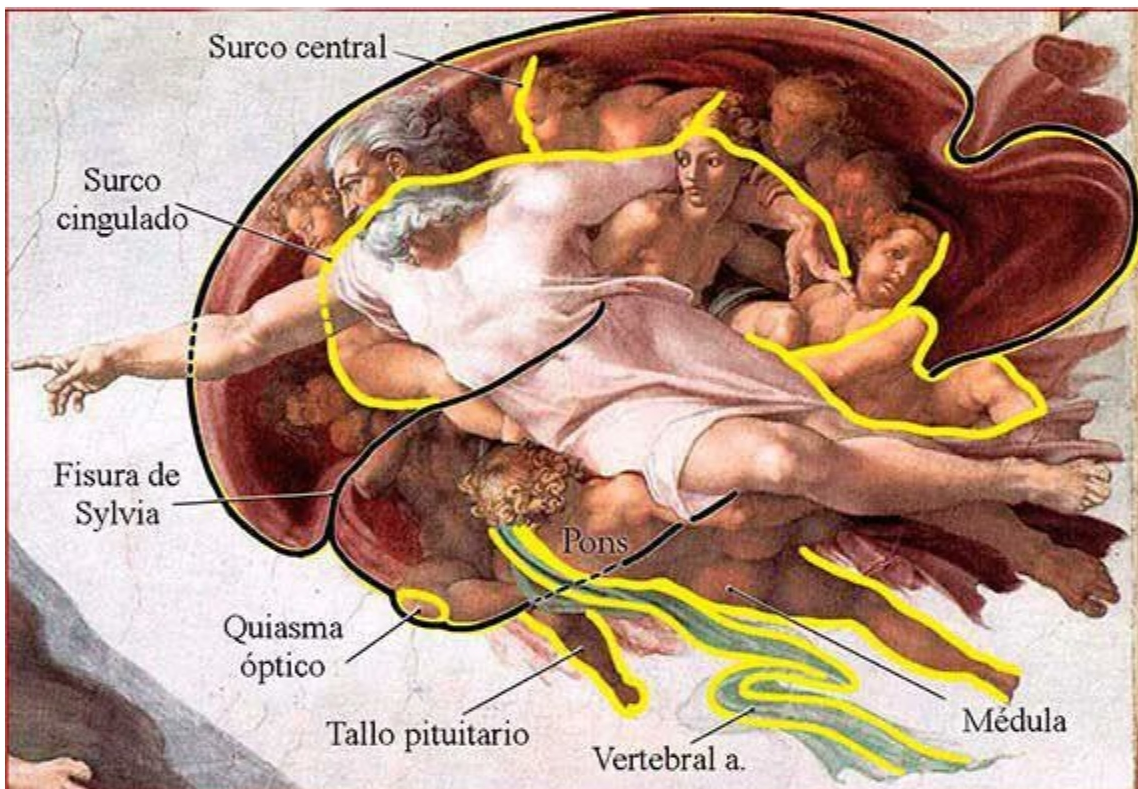
In short, there are 9 scenes from Genesis across the center: the story of man's creation, and his fall from grace...



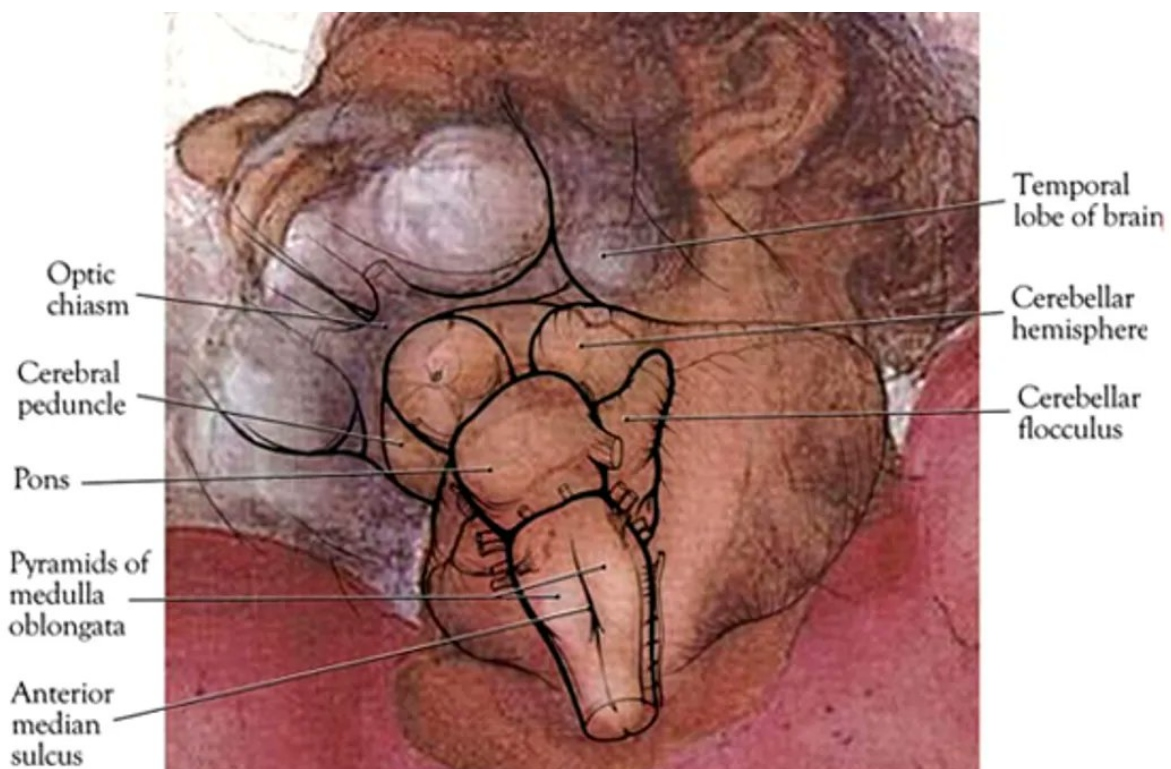
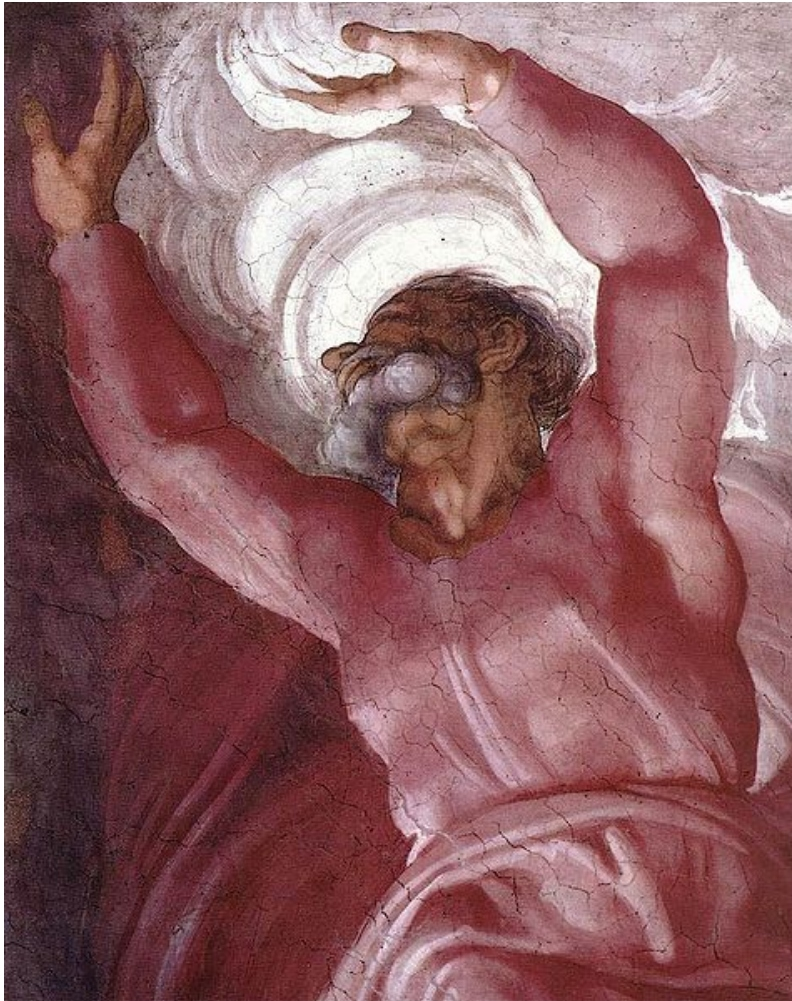
Including, of course, the Creation of Adam — perhaps the most famous image in history. The moment God gives the gift of life to the first man: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."



But there's so much more than meets the eye. For one thing, God reaches through what appears to be the prefrontal cortex of an anatomically correct brain...



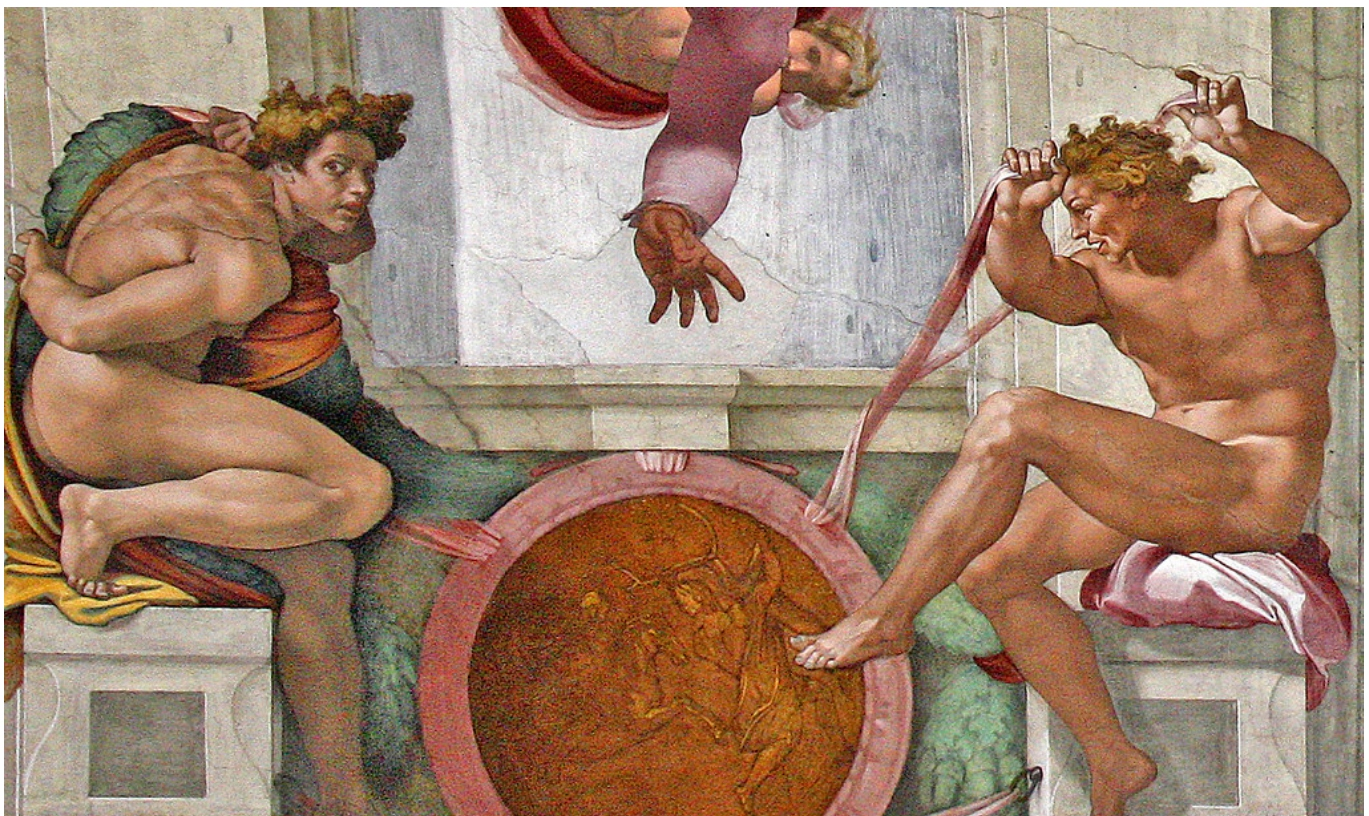
And there's a brain stem concealed in God's neck. Michelangelo, an expert in anatomy, was creating a sort of treatise of the human body — celebrating the wonder of man's origin story.



And it's not only a celebration of the body, but the soul — imparted to Adam as if by an electric charge through his finger. Why isn't Adam's finger fully outstretched like God's is? Because to find God, we need only reach towards him as vigorously as he reaches towards us.



Then, surrounding the panels are all these nude figures called the Ignudi. They seem to frame each scene, but nobody really knows why. Perhaps they're simply reflecting Michelangelo's love of classical nude sculpture...





Around the outside are Old Testament prophets who predicted Christ's coming, like Isaiah and Zechariah. They're painted right into the architecture — except the ceiling is smooth. It was made 3D by architectural elements entirely painted on.





Then there are figures not from the Bible: the Sibyls. They're oracles from other ancient traditions who also foretold Christ's coming — from Persia to Libya. Anticipation of the saviour came from all across the ancient world...



But many have pointed out that the ceiling of the most holy space in Christendom doesn't actually contain any Christian (New Testament) theology. Why is that?



Well, there's one more clue. In Michelangelo's Garden of Eden, Eve isn't reaching for an apple — it's a fig...

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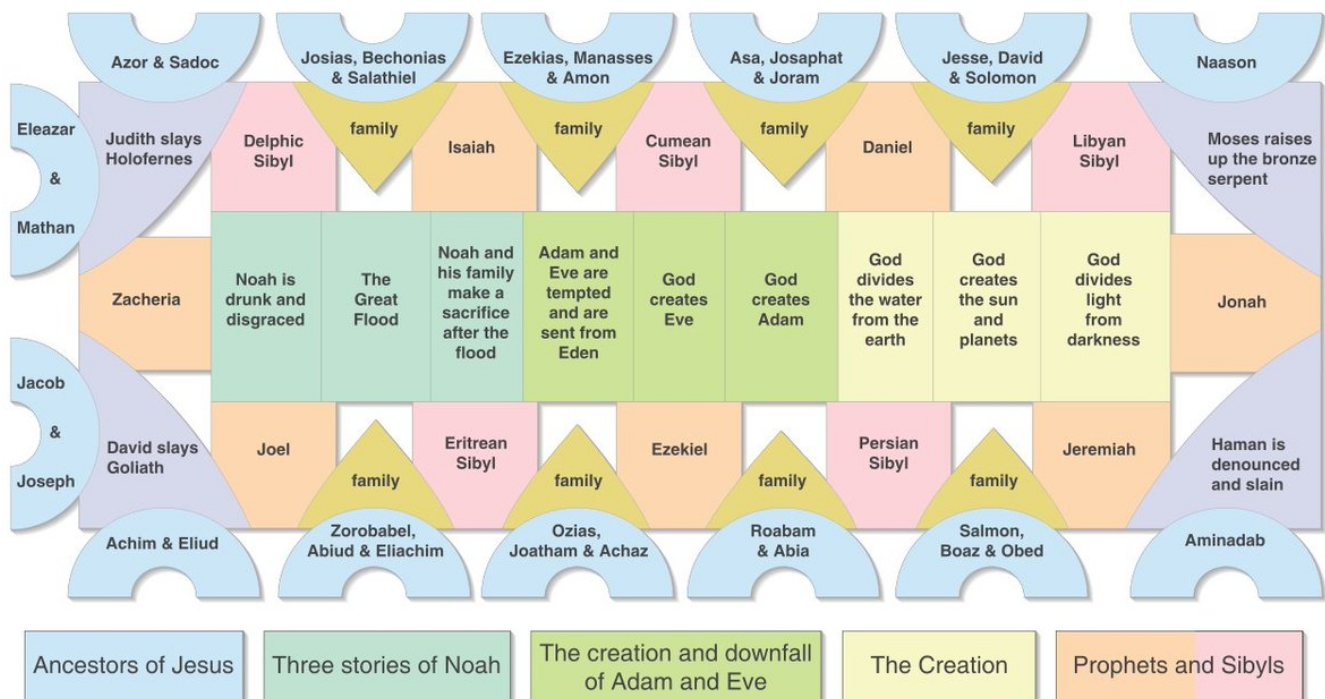


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In medieval Christian tradition, the Forbidden Fruit (not specified in the Bible) was always an apple. But Michelangelo's interpretation suggests he was familiar with the old Jewish tradition of a fig tree...



Why choose this? He was painting a path from the Hebrew Bible and the classical world right up to the Catholic Church. Other cultures weren't at odds with Christianity, but awaiting it — and it was time to unite them all...



Jesus isn't present on the ceiling, but everything leads up to him. From the millennia of prophecies that predicted him, to his Jewish ancestral family painted around the outside, to the need for salvation in the first place.





The ceiling is an almighty bridge connecting the Old Testament with the New — and the chosen people of Israel with their successors in the Catholic Church. Decades later, Michelangelo would return to complete the story above the altar: The Last Judgment...



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