The Savior’s Descent and a Message of Hope

It is likely that none of Carl Bloch’s paintings resonated more with him than *Descent from the Cross*. The painting is itself a chronicle of Bloch’s suffering after the death of his wife. The artist contrasts dimness and light to explore the world’s darkness without Christ and the brightness and hope found in Him. Though this work initially presents deep suffering, its main purpose is to testify of the hope found in Christ’s Resurrection.

**Historical Context**

*Descent from the Cross* was heavily influenced by Bloch’s deep grief, channeled through his experience as an artist. Bloch completed this painting in the same year that his wife, Alma Trepka, died ("Bloch Timeline"). Through this work, Bloch expresses the darkness and sorrow he felt as his 18 happy years of marriage ended ("Carl H. Bloch"). As viewers, we also grieve to know how close Bloch himself was to death when he painted this piece. *Descent from the Cross* was the 58-year-old Bloch’s penultimate painting, and his final Biblical one ("Bloch Timeline"); stomach cancer claimed his life only four years later ("Carl H. Bloch,” "InSite" 14). With this knowledge, we mourn not only for Bloch’s loss, but also for the artist’s approaching death. In *Descent from the Cross*, Bloch’s 25 years of experience painting Biblical scenes gives remarkable voice to this collective sorrow ("Bloch Timeline"). The painting is a fitting tribute to the suffering of both a new widower and a dying artist.
Analysis

Bloch uses lighting in *Descent from the Cross* to present a beautiful arrangement of both suffering and hope. First, he depicts the condemnation of the world through the overall darkness and red tint of the painting. This is easily Bloch’s darkest work; almost the entire painting is shrouded in shadow. Both the skies above and the earth around the men seem to be drowning in red-tinged darkness. Even the huddling men that are illuminated by the lantern are blanketed in ruddy earth tones. Through this crimson darkness, Bloch depicts both the sinfulness and mourning of a fallen world without the Savior. No one can escape the spiritual darkness and grief of a world that has just lost its Light.

The effect of lighting becomes the most symbolic and personal when we identify the four men present in this scene. We know that Joseph of Arimathea is holding the lantern, and Nicodemus and John the Beloved are the two physically wrapping the body. The identity of the fourth man, though, is unknown. From the stretcher in the lower right of the painting, it appears that the man’s only role is the fourth carrier of Christ’s body. What is most intriguing is that, in contrast to his three lit companions, this man is depicted in near-silhouette. At first glance, he is easy to miss as a member of this group, as he easily fades into the darkness of the background. He also appears to be the only man actively grieving for the Savior. Finally, he is placed the highest vertically in the painting, providing a physical bridge between the skies and the earth. Through this unknown, dark, and bereft man, Bloch symbolizes the fear and sadness of both the mortal world and the spiritual world. Bloch may have even meant the man to represent himself grieving over the loss of his wife. However, the anonymity of the man enhances his universal symbolism. He represents the obscure suffering of the majority of humankind. From the fourth man’s expression, it is easy to see the lack of hope that Bloch must have felt after the death of his wife, and the heartache and loneliness we all feel in this life.
But further patterns of lighting assert that hopelessness without Christ is not the only message of Christ’s descent from Calvary. In marvelous contrast to the dark world above, below, and around Him, Christ is robed not in the staining blood of His recent sacrifice, but in perfect whiteness. The actual illumination of Christ emphasizes His approaching victory over death. In most of Bloch’s paintings of Christ’s earthly ministry, Christ has been accompanied by brilliant light. This scene shows that, though the Crucifixion has faded that light somewhat, it has not removed it completely. Even in death, Christ’s body continues to shine and promise hope that He will make our lives bright again. The brilliance of the lantern established this hope even more firmly. This lone lamp shines brighter than we would expect based on the dimness of the four men that huddle around it. That additional brightness is directed not towards the men, but towards the Savior and us. This creates a triangle of light that emphasizes that we can still find spiritual light through the Savior.

A final, hopeful use of light is in the horizon depicted in the painting. A thin band of bright blue stands in sharp contrast to the shadows above it. This band of light stretches across the entire painting, and appears to pierce through the languishing darkness to reach our eyes. This painting promises that a band of hope through Christ can be seen even when every other part of the world seems to have been stained with darkness. This bright line may even represent Christ’s physical location, midway between Earth and Heaven and rising as He resurrects. Through this lighting, Bloch bears a quiet testimony of hope through the Savior. Even as the artist grieved for the loss of his wife, He understood that loss brings with it hope for future restoration.

**Personal Response**

When I first saw this piece, I only saw the darkness. Content to write the painting off as another gloomy representation of the tragedy of the Crucifixion, I nearly moved on to another
painting that I thought would be more multidimensional. However, as I studied the expression of the silhouetted man in the background, I realized I had seen that expression before in my dad when he called our family together several years ago. My mom has suffered from bipolar disorder for years, but it wasn’t until I was 8 years old that she tried to take her life for the first time. I remember the utter despair in my dad’s face as he told my siblings and me that Mom’s illness was worse than the doctors had thought it was. Dad’s expression of hopelessness, confusion, and worry perfectly matched the pitiful sorrow I now saw in the fourth man’s face. It was only as I concentrated on this dark hopelessness that I began to see the light in this painting.

As I saw the radiance of the lantern, the Savior, and the line on the horizon, I thought about the cycling nature of my mom’s health. Even in the scariest moments in the years since her diagnosis (and there have been many), as a family we know that Mom’s health never declines perpetually. It always returns to her, even if it takes several months. In this way, I’ve experienced dozens of times the bittersweet hope that Bloch must have felt after the death of his wife. Both of us know that when life seems pressingly dark, there is light on the horizon because of the Savior.

The main message of Descent from the Cross is not suffering or darkness, though these elements are present in abundance in the work. The ultimate meaning of the work is found in the hope that it expresses. We live in a suffering-dimmed world filled with tragedies as poignant as Bloch’s loss of his wife and decline as an artist. In the middle of all of this gloominess, it is easy to silently grieve and fade into a background of darkness, as the fourth man does in this painting. However, we can instead find hope that the Light of the World will never be extinguished. As we focus not on the bleakness of mortality, but on the promise of the Resurrection, we find hope that gives life truer, deeper meaning.
Works Cited


