

Where Horology and Theology Intersect

By Daniel Benson, CMW

Years ago, I sat in front of my thesis supervisor trying to persuade her that my field of research—the intersection of horology and theology—was unique, worthy, and fascinating. She was skeptical on all counts, and besides, “who else would be interested in this stuff?” Well, that question was answered in early February as more than 100 people gathered at a special symposium and exhibit at Gordon College, in Wenham, Massachusetts.

“What Has Greenwich to Do with Jerusalem?” brought together horologists, theologians, historians, clock-and-watch enthusiasts, and the merely curious to explore how clocks, time-keeping, religion, and faith have all intersected and influenced each other in a myriad of ways for centuries. The event was conceived, planned, and curated by Bob Frishman,¹ a noted horologist and scholar, and Damon DiMauro, a professor at Gordon College and clock enthusiast, and facilitated by Gregory Detto, the director of exhibits at the College’s Barrington Centre for the Arts.

The title of this event may sound odd, but it echoes a classic query of the second-century Christian theologian, Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” He was exploring the connections between secular learning and religious culture. In the same way, this exhibit poses a similar sort of question, albeit in our title, Greenwich stands as the symbolic home of time-keeping, and Jerusalem holds its own place representing three of the world’s



1. See my review of Frishman's biography, *Edward Duffield, Philadelphia Clockmaker, Citizen, and Gentleman*, published in the August 2024 issue of HT.

Entrance to Galleries.

great religions. In this, we are prompted to wonder how time, timekeeping, clocks, religion, and faith not only meet but often collide with interesting effects.

The exhibit featured more than 80 artworks, timepieces, and rare books illustrating the close relationship between horology and theology over the course of eight centuries. Of particular interest:

- reproductions of historic art such as the Boticelli's 1480 fresco of Augustine (perhaps pondering the meaning of time?), painted

Duffield Clock.



allegories of King Solomon repairing a clock, Lady Wisdom with many complex timepieces, and Father Time holding a clock;

- extracts from the Rule of St. Benedict citing the importance of a timekeeper (candles, water clocks, and then later mechanical devices) to ensure the punctuality of the monks' prayer life;
- a first edition King James Bible (1611) with a detailed calendar for daily readings;
- clocks by missionary Moses Peck (1717-1780, Boston), Quaker Ebenezer Sargent (1717-1797, Newbury), Nathaniel Mulliken II (1752-1776, Lexington), Simon Willard (1753-1848, Boston), and numerous others;
- a figural cast-metal mantel clock of "The Reaper" used as a prop by American photographer Mathew Brady (1822-1896) in dozens of portraits, including of General Custer and Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross.
- a selection of European and American watches and marine chronometers.

Reaper clock and photos.





Moses Peck.



CLARA BARTON
March 1821 - May 1905
Barton was a Quaker abolitionist and nurse. She was the first woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. She was also a prominent humanitarian and the founder of the American Red Cross.



GEORGE CLINTON
March 1739 - May 1805
Clinton was a prominent lawyer and politician. He was the first Governor of New York and served as the Vice President of the United States.



DR. MARY EDWARDS WALKER
March 1812 - May 1905
Walker was a Quaker abolitionist and nurse. She was the first woman to be elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. She was also a prominent humanitarian and the founder of the American Red Cross.

The symposium itself consisted of a full day of presentations and discussions, led by four specialists on different themes:

- Dr. Jennifer Powell McNutt, professor of Biblical and Theological Studies at Wheaton College (Illinois): “God’s Time in Our Hands: Reformation Bibles and the Reforming of Time.”
- Dr. Sara Schechner, recently retired curator of the Collection of Historical Scientific Instruments at Harvard University: “Sundials and Matters of Faith.”

- Rev. Daniel Benson (the author of this article), horologist, minister, and theologian based in Toronto: “Beyond Paley’s Watch: Exploring Horological Metaphors, Imagery, and Symbolism in Theology.”
- Mr. William J. H. Andrewes, horologist, scholar, and designer of public sundials: “Teach Us to Number Our Days: The Origins of the Mechanical Clock in European Monasteries and Churches.”

Speakers and curators.



The presentations were followed by a lively, informal discussion as the audience peppered the speakers with a broad range of questions after which everyone moved into the spacious exhibit halls for casual conversations and to study the timepieces, documents, and artwork. Later, the curators and speakers celebrated a successful and satisfying day with a delicious meal at The Hart House, a restaurant occupying one of the oldest houses in America (1640).

You can find more details about the exhibit and symposium at the College's website: <https://www.gordon.edu/horologyandreligion>.

Oh, and I did manage to convince my supervisor that a study of horology and theology was not only possible but compelling. My research uncovered such a wealth of material, she insisted I had to narrow my focus, otherwise I would have a book instead of a paper! She was delighted to hear about this special event and to see that this so-called unique interest had broader appeal than even I had imagined.

Conversations in the gallery.



Partial view of gallery.



Rev. Daniel Benson is a life-long horologist, having studied watchmaking at George Brown College, Toronto, and graduated first place at WOSTEP, Neuchâtel, Switzerland. He taught watchmaking at George Brown and has subsequently enjoyed a varied career including bookselling, writing and editing, publishing, strategic and corporate communications, and ministry within The United Church of Canada.