

## Biblical Imagery in Medieval England 750-1550

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Reflecting the place of the Bible as the bedrock of medieval culture, biblical imagery was ubiquitous in medieval England, yet it has not hitherto been the subject of a comprehensive modern monograph. Such precedents as there were – notably M. R. James’s *The Apocalypse in Art* (London: British Academy, 1931) and F. Wormald’s ‘Bible Illustration in Medieval Manuscripts’, in G. W. H. Lampe (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible II* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1969), along with various iconographic studies – were broader in geographical range but more restricted in basic subject matter. Accordingly, while many books start with an apologia for why yet another work on a familiar subject may be justified, Kauffmann might reasonably have begun by pointing out that a study such as his has long been a desideratum. The reasons why the need had not previously been supplied are easy to see: the scope of the subject is enormous, and until recently the groundwork that would permit an authoritative overview had not been accomplished. What made the difference (as the author himself notes: p. vii) was the publication between 1975 and 1996 of the six-volume series ‘A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles’ (the first part of which to appear, incidentally – Romanesque Manuscripts – was by Kauffmann himself).<sup>(1)</sup> Concurrently, a series of grand exhibitions surveyed English medieval art by period, providing a convenient conspexus of the material and of the scholarship thereon: ‘The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture 600-900’ (British Museum, 1991), ‘The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art, 966-1066’ (British Museum, 1984-5), ‘English Romanesque Art, 1066-1200’ (Hayward Gallery, 1984), and ‘The Age of Chivalry, Art in Plantagenet England 1200-1400’ (Royal Academy, 1987). The last in the series, ‘Gothic: Art for England 1400-1547’ (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2003-4) opened around the time the present book was published and so cannot have helped the author.

Yet if the task was rendered feasible by these aids, it nevertheless remained daunting – surveying an enormously rich and varied corpus of visual material in relation to its contexts, over a period of more than eight centuries. The result, it should be said at once, is a triumphant success.

Faced with an almost inexhaustible body of material, the author’s approach was, logically, to select particular works (or classes thereof) that might be held to typify their period, both in terms of artistic output and of underlying historical currents. Accordingly, most chapters offer a brief sketch of the most important historical or, occasionally, theological developments, a broad account of the class or classes of work that are characteristic of the period, followed by a detailed examination of one or more examples of the genres in

question. The story begins with the 'Northumbrian Renaissance' (Ch. 1), where a dominant theme is seen to be the counterpoint of Irish and Roman visual traditions, epitomised by the contrast between the Book of Durrow and the Codex Amiatinus, the Athlone Plaque and the Ruthwell Cross. Late Anglo-Saxon England (Ch. 2) is, inevitably, represented by the two illustrated vernacular codices, the Junius 11 collection of biblical poetry and the prolifically illustrated Old English Hexateuch; the fact that neither was finished adds to the mystery of their purpose, production and patronage. The twelfth century is explored in two chapters (3-4), the first treating giant bibles, the second psalters; in both, a manuscript dating from the 1130s – the Bury Bible and the Shaftesbury Psalter – is singled out for detailed examination.

The thirteenth century is likewise given two chapters (5-6) but here, reflecting a greater wealth of material, the genres and media considered multiply. Chapter 5 not only tackles Psalters, Books of Hours and Apocalypses but also sculpture (the understated cycle included on the west front of Wells Cathedral, and the smaller but, in context, more prominent one inside the chapter house of Salisbury Cathedral), with a brief note on wall paintings. In Chapter 6 the imagery of kingship is considered, first in the context of books (especially the fluid relationship between depictions of the anointing of David on the one hand, and medieval coronation practice on the other); and then in royally-sponsored wall paintings, focusing inevitably on the Painted Chamber at Westminster with its 'emphasis on the Maccabees as exemplars of chivalric knighthood, and the books of Kings with stories of good and bad rulers and the triumph of sanctity in the shape of the prophets'. (p. 205)

Chapter 7 scrutinises the fourteenth century through the lens of a series of famous manuscripts with particularly extensive Old Testament imagery: the Tickhill, Isabella and Queen Mary Psalters, the Carew-Poyntz Hours, and the Egerton Genesis – whose differences of approach and iconography are, the author reminds us, more striking than their similarities. A final section explores the Holkham Bible Picture Book, and in particular its apocryphal infancy cycle. Chapter 8 'pans out' to consider the late medieval parish church as a whole, reviewing its missals, murals (particularly the 'Doom'), windows and altarpieces (painted and alabaster alike). A more summary final chapter (9) sketches the survival of illustrated printed bibles against the background of the Reformation and iconoclasm.

The main text is supported by two helpful appendices (both relating to Romanesque Bibles) and a glossary. There are indices of iconography and manuscripts as well as a general index. If the first two seem fairly comprehensive, the third is less so, and could usefully have included more cross-referencing. It includes some, but by no means all, of the 'common names' of manuscripts and objects, and while certain items have multiple entries (the ideal), others do not. The Athlone plaque, for instance, helpfully appears both under 'Athlone' and under 'Dublin, National Museum of Ireland, crucifixion plaque'; but the Balfour and Warwick Ciboria, by contrast, feature neither under 'Balfour' or 'Warwick', nor under 'Ciborium, Balfour/Warwick' but only as sub-entries under 'London, Victoria and Albert Museum' – where the non-specialist is least likely to look for them. Some highly desirable general headings are lacking; there is no entry for either 'altarpieces' or 'retables', although pp. 266-70 are devoted to them, while individual examples such as that associated with Henry Despenser and that at Thornham Parva appear under the headings 'Despenser' and 'Thornham Parva', not under 'Retable, Despenser / Thornham Parva'. Symptomatic of the uncertainties is the circumstance that Peter Lombard is filed under 'Peter', but Peter Comestor under 'Comestor'!

The book is handsomely produced and well-illustrated, with 16 colour plates and over 200 black and white ones, the latter generally located within the part of the text to which they relate. Most of the key points discussed are supported by illustrations, though the reader must remember how small a percentage of some of the major cycles is shown – the Old English Hexateuch, for instance, contains approximately twice as many biblical scenes as the total number of pictures in this whole book. However, in fact it is only in the discussion of the series of extremely rich cycles in various fourteenth-century manuscripts (there are nearly 500 Old Testament scenes in the Tickhill Psalter alone) that readers are likely to be struck by how much they are missing. (True, much of the imagery in question was reproduced in three distinguished monographs published in the first half of the twentieth century; however, these are themselves now rare books, unlikely to be accessible to most readers – none of them is in my university's library.) Clearly, there was no easy

solution to this conundrum. The individual image the omission of which is most likely to disappoint the reader is the lower border at the start of the Feast of All Saints in the mid-fifteenth-century missal, Bodleian Library, Laud. Misc. 302, which is described as 'a satire on the Last Supper in which a white cat presides at a meal with donkeys at a table set with a chalice and dishes with fish'. (p. 252) Curious readers may be interested to know that they can turn to O. Pächt and J. J. G. Alexander, *Illuminated Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, Oxford III* (Oxford, 1973), pl. XCIV, where, moreover, they will see that the imagery in question is rather more extensive – including animal musicians, an owl surrounded by (?) geese, and another white cat catching a mouse – and, that considered as a whole, it looks more like a parody of a secular feast (such as that in the Luttrell Psalter or those in the calendar illustrations for January in Books of Hours) than of the Last Supper.

Rich in reflections and suggestions, the book explores by turn the iconographic, religious and social history of the biblical imagery selected. Of the many interesting points that are highlighted, it must suffice to note: the dilemma of the Anglo-Saxon artist faced with the radically different Roman and Irish pictorial traditions (pp. 30-1); the variety of approaches to illustrating biblical matter taken in the twelfth-century Bury Bible (p. 102); the suggestion that Adeliza of Louvain, second queen of Henry I, was the patron of the Shaftesbury Psalter (pp. 141-6); and the compelling observation that the realistic depictions of copulating couples in the early thirteenth-century Munich Psalter indicate a secular rather than a monastic context for the manuscript! (p. 156) Similarly, Kauffmann warns against placing too much significance on the absence of anointing in the coronation of David in the Glazier Psalter (which had been interpreted as an anti-royalist, clerical touch) in the face of the 'bewildering variety in the depiction' of this subject (p. 194); he reminds us that, whereas in France during the high and late middle ages the finest books were made for royalty, in England it is the gentry that emerge as the principal patrons (p. 229); and he carefully reassesses the status of the Holkham Bible Picture Book (which has recently been described as a 'popular' book) – underlining the fact that it was an expensive product whose depictions of 'contemporary life' are stylised and measured (rather than naïve), and pointing to its connections with contemporary sermons as well as with 'vernacular culture'. (pp. 232 ff.) (Such a view is firmly in accord with the evidence of the preliminary miniature wherein a Dominican patron instructs the scribe to do his best on the grounds that the volume will be shown to rich people.)

As these examples show, the author invariably endeavours to explore the material in its own terms – in so far as this is possible – rather than in the light of currently fashionable themes and constructs, or in order to demonstrate some over-arching concept or argument. Moreover, he is sensitive to the limitations of the evidence, and scrupulously avoids turning possibilities into probabilities (here one might contrast the balanced and open-ended discussion in the present work of the much-debated issue of the relationship between liturgical drama and imagery, with the more enthusiastic but less convincing views put forward in a recent monograph on the Egerton Genesis).<sup>(2)</sup> At the same time, he takes a broad view of his subject, regularly placing English practices in a European perspective. Thus we are reminded that the English tradition of elaborate pictorial prefatory cycles to psalters, first witnessed in the eleventh century, was not matched on the continent until the end of the twelfth; that for much of the thirteenth century English patterns of psalter illustration differ from the continental 'norms'; and that, if French traditions of psalter illustration were finally adopted later in that century (p. 159), nonetheless fourteenth-century English Horae do not use the subjects customary in their French equivalents. (p. 208)

The material that seems least well-suited to the general approach is that covered in the first and the last medieval chapters (1 and 8) – for exactly the reverse reasons. So little Christian imagery survives from early Anglo-Saxon England that almost any extant item is by definition exceptional, while so copious is the body of material from later medieval parish churches that it is difficult to make any selection that is truly representative. Moreover, the decision to treat the art of parish churches as the final topic, though laudably opening up the vistas of a 'new', far more populous social group, equally means that, by and large, the period from the late-fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century is represented by a different class of artefact from that examined in the previous chapters. This was an art determined more by quantity than by quality; and though interesting as such, the effect – after the erudite world of the Codex Amiatinus, the high

investment of the Romanesque Giant Bibles and a sequence of elevated works produced for royal and noble patrons – is to make the middle ages go out not with a bang but a whimper. A possible solution here would have been to have given the later period two chapters (as was the case for both the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries), and allotted one to more exalted English works – such as the Sherborne Missal, the Psalter and Hours of John, duke of Bedford, those of Henry Beauchamp, and the Hours of Elizabeth the Queen – along with some consideration of the French and Flemish works that were acquired by those with the means to do so (one thinks, for example, of the lavish Bible historiale made in Bruges, that belonged to King Edward IV). The former would have given a more buoyant picture of later medieval imagery and imagers; the latter would have reminded the reader of the extent to which the visual culture of the upper echelons of late medieval English society was formed by continental artists; while together, alongside the existing chapter, they would have provided a more rounded picture of the period.

When the subject matter was already boundless, it is with diffidence that one nominates other items for inclusion; nonetheless, there are areas – in addition to the above – which are wholly passed over and which surely deserved notice. None of the great biblical roof-boss cycles (notably those at Ely, Norwich (two), Salle and Tewkesbury) is mentioned; the omission is particularly regrettable in the case of Norwich Cloister, where the apocalypse series is fuller than that of most of the thirteenth-century manuscripts that are discussed in Chapter 5 and to which it has some documented connection, since at least part of the cycle was based on ‘a history of the Apocalypse’ bought for the purpose (as we learn from the Cathedral’s communal roll for 1346-7).

Two media that do not feature at all (bar a brief mention for comparative purposes on p. 239) are wood-carving and textiles. The scatter of biblical (mainly Christological) imagery on bench-ends might have enriched the treatment of parish churches, particularly since these were depictions that were unquestionably seen by the parishioners at large. As for misericords, if biblical subjects are a negligible percentage of the surviving corpus (around 2 per cent), they nevertheless number well over 100, occur in prestigious places (such as Gloucester, Norwich, Ripon and Worcester) and remind us that scriptural imagery might be acceptable in a ‘lowly’ context. Textiles, by contrast, often adorned high-status settings. That opus anglicanum (the fine textile work that was perhaps England’s most widely-admired art form abroad) could be the forum for extensive biblical imagery is clear from spectacular examples like the early fourteenth-century Bologna Cope, along with the early fifteenth-century Towneley Vestments; and the scriptures in which the clergy literally clothed themselves have an interest all their own. Concurrently, tapestries acquired from France and Flanders made biblical imagery a prestigious part of the interior décor of the élite of church and state alike. Documentary sources reveal, for example, that Edward IV had ‘Histories’ of Nebuchadnezzar and of the Passion in this form; while still extant (albeit now in Aix-en-Provence) are parts of a lengthy sequence of tapestries with scenes from the lives of Christ and the Virgin that were commissioned in Brussels in 1511 by the Prior and Cellarer of Christ Church, Canterbury, to be hung above the stalls in their cathedral.

The reader might reasonably have expected the author to have ended his work with reflections on some of the general themes that run through the material he has so admirably surveyed (most would, I suspect, have happily sacrificed the post-medieval section (Ch. 9) to make space for such). One might, for instance, have considered the changing popularity of biblical (as opposed to hagiographical or even secular) imagery in general, assessed diachronistic patterns in the relative popularity of individual subjects, and examined the iconographic evolution of particularly important ones. One might have asked how, when and why England was distanced from, rather than linked to continental traditions; explored to what extent and with what effect biblical subjects were presented in the trappings of the contemporary world; or examined the ways in which contemporary figures were inserted into the depictions of biblical events (one thinks, for instance, of the contrast between the small and rather abject Judith of Flanders desperately clutching the bottom of a rough-hewn cross in the crucifixion frontispiece to one of her Anglo-Saxon gospel books, and the resplendent Margaret, duchess of Clarence kneeling at prayer beside the temple steps up which the young Virgin Mary is ascending in the ‘Clarence Hours’). Some such general themes – notably the treatment of Jews, the importance of Peter Comestor’s *Historia Scholastica*, and the affect of the rise of the doctrine of Purgatory

on the decline of strictly biblical imagery – are scattered through the text; nevertheless, focused resumés of these and other topics would have been most useful.

In essence, however, such observations are less criticisms than a reflection of how rich is the subject matter of this book and how many lines of enquiry it suggests. Indeed, Biblical Imagery may be likened to a Bach Prelude: perfect in itself yet inevitably leaving one longing for the fugue that could follow! In sum, Kauffmann has provided an elegant and assured treatment of a supremely important topic, which is of relevance to all who are in any way concerned with medieval England and medieval belief. If art historians are likely most to enjoy the detailed case studies, the ‘broad-brush’ introductory sections make them accessible to all; and it is, above all, for historians and literary critics that the book should be required reading – as a thought-provoking conspexus of a vast field which is of central importance to their work and about which they are often less knowledgeable than they should be!

## Notes

1. J. J. G. Alexander, general ed., *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles* (six volumes, London: Harvey Miller, 1975-1996); C. M. Kauffmann, *Romanesque Manuscripts, 1066-1190* (London: Harvey Miller, 1975).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Mary Coker Joslin and Carolyn Coker Joslin Watson, *The Egerton Genesis* (London: British Library and University of Toronto, 2001).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author would like to thank the reviewer most warmly for his thoughtful, constructive and positive review.

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