



The Saint John's Bible: Biblical Authority within the Illuminated Word

MICHAEL PATELLA

Christians have a mandate from the risen Christ himself to proclaim the content of the Bible as good news to a sore world (Matt 28:19–20). Not only is it difficult to get Christians to agree on what the Bible says, however; they even have differences on how to say it. There are divisions between conservatives and liberals, fundamentalists and mainliners, as well as splits among Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Protestants. These divisions plague discussions on both biblical authority and proclamation, and it is precisely this problem that *The Saint John's Bible* hopes to address. It does so by expanding the notions of both biblical authority and proclamation through an appeal to the Christian tradition.

ILLUMINATION IN THE MANUSCRIPT TRADITION

The Saint John's Bible is a revitalization of the tradition that produced the handwritten, calligraphic exemplars of the Middle Ages. Many of these works, such as the *Book of Kells*, the *Lorsch Gospels*, and the *Uta Codex* have come to define much of the culture of that day along with the country that produced them. They

The Saint John's Bible, the first handwritten and illuminated Bible in over five hundred years, proclaims the biblical message through the text itself and also through artistic interpretation that invites readers and viewers to heed the word of God (and experience its authority) in different ways.

all have in common the fact that they predate the printing press. This factor is no small matter in discussing biblical authority.

Prior to Johann Gutenberg's first printed Bible in 1455, Christendom in the West comprised a unified cultural entity despite its various languages and regions. Eastern Christianity, despite being eroded by the relentless advance of Islam, had a cultural hegemony that endured through the Moslem Turks' conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The Renaissance was flourishing and spreading, and although hairline cracks were developing across the European continent, they had not yet erupted into full fissures. With Martin Luther's challenge to the religious structures of the age still more than a half century away, we look to see how Christians viewed the Bible before the Reformation.

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A good way to answer this question is to look at the Bibles produced at that time. The translation was Saint Jerome's Vulgate, and the language was Latin. More often than not, the Vulgate was copied in a monastic scriptorium on vellum or another form of parchment. Generally, the only ones who could read the text were clerics, monks, nuns, and their students. Yet, most people were at least familiar with the biblical narratives through sermons, paintings, and artwork that surrounded their religious lives. If they were fortunate enough to live near a monastery or a cathedral, they would see the statuary, stained glass, and architecture that relayed the story of salvation every time they attended a religious service. Even if they lived in remoter areas, the feasts and festivals of the church, with their processions and hymns, helped with ongoing evangelization. What such forms of piety, devotion, and practice demonstrate is that a symbol system was in place in the social environment that informed both the literate and the illiterate.

Biblical manuscripts contained not only the written word; they also featured the illustrated and illuminated image.¹ Many of these images had abstract elements associated with them, and they echoed what was being set in stone and glass in the churches, cathedrals, and abbeys. It would be wrong for us to consider these depictions as mere decoration, although there was plenty of that; they were much more. The artwork within these manuscripts was another form of translation.

The written Latin word provided one means in which the faithful could hear the word of God, and the colorful illustrations translated that word into image. Since the medieval symbol system was so evident in the mores, practices, and culture of the day, the biblical art tapped into another level of understanding, one that went beyond ratiocination and moved into the imaginative process. Consequently,

¹The term “illumination” is often used to refer to images in handwritten Bibles. The gold and silver used in their production allowed for the pages to sparkle and shine, particularly when turning them in a darkened church lit by candles or oil lamps.

although people had a literal interpretation of the Bible, the Christian symbol system, as seen in art, liturgy, and ecclesial structures, provided a viable counterbalance to blind biblical fundamentalism. Unlike our current examples of fundamentalism, which hold the Bible as the sole and exclusive fount of revelation, the premodern church could draw from a wider source.

The world has changed since 1455. *The Saint John's Bible* does not attempt to replicate the designs or artwork of Christianity's first fifteen hundred years. In fact, from the beginning of the project, the Committee on Illumination and Text (CIT)—the group at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, that works with the scriptorium in Wales by providing the exegetical and theological input for the project—was resolute to avoid all forms of antiquarian nostalgia. What this Bible does set out to do, however, is call upon the capabilities of the human imagination to expand and grow, just as was done in earlier periods of Christian history. Similarly, it pushes those same capabilities to utilize the discoveries and cultural touchstones of contemporary society.

PROCLAMATION: AUTHORITARIANISM OR AUTHORITY?

To take biblical authority seriously, we must take just as seriously the great breadth of revelation the Bible represents and the expansive interpretation it is capable of fostering. Many Christians view the Bible not as a door to divine mystery but as a mere guide for moral living. This last point may sometimes be covered with such descriptors as “burning word,” “purifying word,” and “word of God,” but when the rhetoric is cleared away, it still comes down to a judgment on a people's righteousness. One side is saved, and the other side is condemned; this action is good, that action is evil. To elaborate further, many hold that divine intervention as depicted in the Bible provides the means for people themselves to separate the wheat from the chaff. The exercise of biblical authority is thereby kept within the sphere of human behavior, and to the rest of the world, Christians, under the assumption that they are witnessing the love of God, end up looking cranky, self-righteous, dyspeptic, and grouchy. If this assessment is true—and I believe it is truer than many of us would like it to be, certainly in the popular mind at least—then it is hard to see how any claim to the Bible's universal authority can be convincing.

The root of the problem may lie in the understanding of the term “authority.” One way is to see it as meaning *that which commands*, and the other is to hold it as representing *the power to influence*. Maybe we have regarded the word of God more as an order from a taskmaster than as an invitation from a lover. Commanding is easier at first, and it may work for a while, but in the long run it fails; people always look for a way to escape servitude.

An invitation from one's beloved, on the other hand, changes our response to the word. Given the freedom to accept or reject a beckoning call, we will at least be curious about it. Such curiosity gives birth to imaginative thinking, and at that

point the Bible has influenced the person—it has shown its authority. *The Saint John's Bible* follows this tack.

THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE AND METAPHOR

Almost from the very beginning of the project, the CIT has seen its job as facilitating the marriage of theology and art. At the root of the endeavor is the understanding that theology and art both deal with metaphor, and in this case, metaphor communicates the truth of divine revelation. The Bible itself uses metaphor; psalms, prophecies, and parables are full of them. Theologians from the earliest days of Christianity spoke and wrote in metaphors; Origen, Irenaeus, and the Cappadocians employed them in their essays and definitions. We can say that the language of God is metaphor. Realities beyond human comprehension defy description and must rely on the imaginative process as the means for communication and expression. Seeing the burning bush in our mind's eye can tell us more about the sacred name than a treatise on divine ontology.

In speaking about *The Saint John's Bible* as a marriage of theology and art, therefore, we are positing the idea that the two are more than complements of each other. We are actually looking at a text that translates the word of God into a different language, the language of image, beauty, and color. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, one's imagination forms the interpretation.

Christian history has shown just how difficult it is for a single individual or group of individuals to claim the Holy Spirit's guidance for a particular interpretation of the Bible. What one group has seen as a biblical interpretation legitimately motivated by the Spirit, others have seen as heresy. Contenders form polarized opinions on the matter at hand, and eventually divisions and schisms ensue. It would seem, therefore, that something like *The Saint John's Bible*, with its reliance on one's Spirit-guided imagination as the determiner of interpretation, could end up dividing Christianity more than it unites it. Even if such a concern may be grounded in a lack of trust in the Spirit's role in scriptural interpretation and authority, the Bible itself offers a simple solution: "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). Here, the CIT has relied on both the Benedictine practice of *lectio divina* and the Christian tradition.

LECTIO DIVINA AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Lying at the heart of Benedictine spirituality is *lectio divina*, the silent, prayerful, and meditative reading of sacred Scripture.² It is an ancient practice that has its origins in the memorization of the Psalter by the ancient monks and nuns of the Egyptian desert. When Saint Benedict wrote his Holy Rule in the sixth century, he stipulated that monastic monks spend part of their day reading the Bible along

²See Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982), and Columba Stewart, *Prayer and Community: The Benedictine Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998) 38–42.

with patristic writings. This method of Scripture study is still part of Benedictine life, and it follows a set pattern: opening prayer, reading the text, studying the text, meditating and ruminating on the text, and a final prayer.

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Although the third step, studying the text, is open to all forms of biblical exegesis, including historical criticism, because *lectio divina* predates the intellectual doubt and skepticism of the modern age, it bypasses the difficulties often associated (justly or not) with historical criticism. *Lectio divina* allows the reader to critique and judge the religious, theological, and spiritual content of the text without doubting that the words that humans have written on the page are really the word of God. The passage in question may be enigmatic, tedious, and even off-putting, but there is meaning to be mined from that text.

Above all, *lectio divina* is highly contextual. No biblical book can be removed from the setting of the Liturgy of the Hours or the Eucharist. Neither can it be read outside the scope of history. Art, culture, and music over time all inform the interpretation of the text, just as art, culture, and music can proclaim the text. There is, nonetheless, a matrix, which gives exegesis its authority, and that is the Christian tradition.

Biblical authority cannot be divorced from the tradition that has formed it. As a Roman Catholic, I realize that bringing tradition into the discussion can, in some circles, sound the alarm bell that the authority of the Holy Bible is about to meet its diminution. On the contrary, tradition *has* biblical authority even though many parts of the whole may not be specifically articulated in the Bible.

Tradition itself, at least as far as it is applied to *The Saint John's Bible*, has a tactile and visual dimension. We can think of the sacraments, how Christians perform them, and how they conceive of them. Water can symbolize many things, but it will always symbolize Holy Baptism, if nothing else. Similarly, bread and wine, blood and body will symbolize the Eucharist. Christian tradition expands some concepts and gives them a deeply symbolic quality, not in terms of constructing them to suit some sectarian purposes, but rather in a way that increases what is already there. For example, light, darkness, way, call, creation, birth, death, life, resurrection, fire, and law are all words that are used in countless ways in everyday speech. Christianity, however, provides a particular matrix within which these terms characterize the very foundation stones of faith. And they are biblical. Remove the faith component, and we are back to everyday speech. The faith component is the tradition, and that faith component is significant in forming biblical authority.

It is not uncommon to hear Lutherans refer to the “five” evangelists: Mat-

thew, Mark, Luke, John, and Johann Sebastian Bach. What is so fascinating about this statement is that it may seem to dilute the witness of the gospel by placing a nonscriptural source on a par with the proclaimed word. Yet, the experience of singing or listening to any number of Bach's chorales or oratorios is enough to show one why, at least with this composer, Lutherans (and not only Lutherans!) are wont to make this claim. Indeed, the term "fifth evangelist" asserts that Bach speaks with biblical authority, and it is the tradition that has granted him that place of distinction. Had not the word of God occupied such a treasured spot in Bach's own soul, one truly doubts he could have written what he wrote, and written it so convincingly. There may have been beautiful music and sublime text, but knowing that his own faith was a primary motivator of his artistry makes his music an authoritative and an inviting means of evangelization.

The example of Bach provides a very important lesson. It shows that God's word can be proclaimed through allegory, metaphor, and art just as much as it can through the written text. Consequently, the living faith of the musicians, artists, and writers, connected as it is to the biblical tradition, gives their work biblical authority. Let's apply this concept specifically to *The Saint John's Bible*.

THE SAINT JOHN'S BIBLE: THE PROCESS OF INTERPRETATION

The Saint John's Bible has two groups involved with its development: the CIT at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, and the scriptorium in Wales, Great Britain. The CIT is composed of an Old Testament and a New Testament exegete, an art historian, a church historian, a theologian, and two artists. This group chose the biblical passages and their degree of artistic treatment—in other words, full, half, or quarter page. The process produced what has been called the schema, and it gave the master calligrapher and artistic director of the project, Donald Jackson, the ability to allot space and time to complete the pages. Next, the CIT wrote a theological brief for each of the seven volumes of *The Saint John's Bible* in order to provide the calligraphers and artists with the biblical and theological background to the texts in question.

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This stage used *lectio divina* as its model and plumbed the depths of the biblical passages. Each of the CIT's meetings began with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. A member would then read the biblical text being examined, and the discussion would involve four steps: the exegesis of the piece, scriptural cross-references, local associations, and finally, free association. These categories need a word of explanation.

Exegesis

Since a goal of *The Saint John's Bible* has been to meld scholarship with art, the CIT wanted to ensure that whatever was said about the text in question rested on solid exegetical footing. Nearly all the passages underwent a historical-critical examination to greater or lesser degree, but other forms of biblical criticism were employed as well, especially canonical criticism.³

Scriptural cross-references

The scriptural cross-references reflect an approach arising from both *lectio divina* and canonical criticism. Not only are there cross-references between Old and New Testament works, but there are also cross-citations between books of each respective Testament. For instance, the brief for the Lukan nativity image (2:1–20) has references from Isaiah associated with it, while the depiction for the Johannine prologue (1:1–18) features the Colossians hymn (1:15–20). In the latter case, the verses are written in an elegant script within the prologue depiction itself.

Local associations

Since the writing of *The Saint John's Bible* is sponsored by Saint John's Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, and particularly because the word of God has a personal resonance inasmuch as a universal one, the CIT wanted to have references to the flora, fauna, and architecture at Saint John's and from central Minnesota. In addition to the backdrop of the Abbey and University Church for the Pentecost scene (Acts 2), the Raising of Lazarus (John 11:1–44) shows the outline of the death's-head moth, which is found in woods around Saint John's. In fact, the scriptorium in Wales sent over its botanical artist, Chris Tomlin, for a two-week stay in Collegeville where he collected and sketched bushes, trees, and insects from Saint John's own prairies and forests. Even the monarch butterfly, which gathers in huge numbers each August on the abbey wetlands and trees, appears as marginalia in selected pages of the Bible.

Free association

Of all the categories, free association has garnered the greatest discussion. The members of the CIT would reflect on the passages and relate how these texts have touched their lives, how artists through history have envisioned them, how musicians have based compositions on them, and how other faiths and cultures have dealt with similar themes. The idea is to allow for the word of God to touch every part of one's being, both personal and communal. Even other areas of science and research enter into the mix, so that leitmotifs dealing with anthropology, physics, evolutionary biology, history, and mathematics can be seen on the pages. After all, the Holy Spirit can proclaim the gospel through the human intellect as well as

³Canonical criticism refers to the study of the relationship of the individual biblical books to each other. The order in which the books fall in the Bible is an important factor in determining how the Bible should be interpreted as a whole. See Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), and *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985).

through the lettered page. Consequently, the creation narratives in Genesis take into account the paleontological findings of the Leakeys in the African Rift Valley, while the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezek 37:1–14 contains images from the great genocides and ecological disasters of the twentieth century. There are references to the Christian liturgy and its chant in the Psalms; to the music of Bach, Beethoven, Prokofiev, Vaughan Williams, and Pärt in the gospel narratives; and even to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the parables. The point is that the word of God does not exist in the sanctuary alone; it touches every part of the human condition, and every part of the human condition finds its resolution in the word of God.

BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

The age-old polemic used to describe the difference between Protestant and Catholic approaches to revelation is the use of the classic phrase “Scripture alone” for Protestants and the rejoinder “Scripture and tradition” for Catholics. *The Saint John’s Bible* does not stand in either of these camps. It can’t. Any illumination breaks the law of “Scripture alone” if we think of Scripture as solely a written text, and Catholics cannot pit Scripture against tradition because Scripture forms and is part of the tradition. There can be no tradition without Scripture or Scripture without tradition. And despite the volumes written to prove the contrary, certainly Martin Luther never really promoted the idea that the two, Scripture and tradition, were somehow separable.⁴ The worship spaces of the Evangelical Church in Germany still have their statues, stained glass, and votive candles.

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The illuminations in *The Saint John’s Bible* proclaim with real biblical authority. Members of the CIT have never doubted that they have been working with a sacred text as they were writing their briefs. The artists and scribes at the scriptorium pored over the Bible and the briefs incessantly before designing a page. In the end, there will be seven volumes of a richly illuminated and calligraphed Bible. Unlike a preacher thumping the pulpit and demanding that people heed the word of God, *The Saint John’s Bible* will sound like the joyous laughter of Christian fellowship at a marvelous banquet. The curious will hear the music and merriment and will peer into the hall, and once they do, they will be invited to the table. They have already heeded the word of God. The glory of God, a glory that proclaims with beauty,

⁴This cohesive understanding of tradition and Scripture is certainly tacit in Luther’s sermons, such as “On Baptism,” and “The Lord’s Supper.” See John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, eds., *Faith and Freedom: An Invitation to the Writings of Martin Luther* (New York: Vintage, 2002) 131–141 (or *Luther’s Works* [Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959] 51:182–193).

love, openness, gladness, and splendor, has an authority that can touch and convert both mind and heart. *The Saint John's Bible*, with its interplay of image and text, strives to be an authoritative proclamation of that glory. ⊕

MICHAEL PATELLA, OSB, is a Benedictine monk and an associate professor of New Testament at Saint John's School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota. He has written on the Gospels of Luke and Mark and is the chair of the Committee on Illumination and Texts for The Saint John's Bible.