

Old Testament Scenes in the Bible of King Wenceslas IV

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The Scripture is a sacred text to both Jews and Christians, and is naturally the fundamental source not only of illustrations of the Old Testament text proper, but also of any Christian or Jewish iconography, as recent research has showed. Although the illustrations of the Old Testament text are found among the earliest codices and scrolls, both Jewish and Christian, it is most probable that such illustrations did exist since the earliest times, but that they have not been preserved for us. We can infer this e.g. from the murals in the synagogue in Dura Europos, dating back to the first half of the 3rd century, which embody the earliest extant cycle which illustrates the Biblical text as a continuous story and not only in the form of isolated scenes. This fact is stressed by Mira Friedman¹ when she comes to consider the hypothetical, lost Jewish originals of Biblical images. On the other hand K. Weitzman has derived such images from lost Greek illuminated manuscripts, in my opinion, unconvincingly. In his last work² he has used parallels with illuminations of Greek Octateuchs from the 10th century for proving such a derivation. It is true that later iconographical development was much more fruitful in Christian art, and that many early Biblical images grew from Hellenistic and Roman sources. In spite of all that, the synagogue in Dura Europos demands that we also take into account Jewish iconographical sources.

Mira Friedman³ postulated two basic possibilities for the emergence of Biblical iconography:

¹ Mira Friedmann, *Bilder zu Bibel*.

² Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art*, Washington 1990.

1) detailed and essentially narrative illustrations of the text proper, as shown by the earliest examples, and

2) iconic and symbolic images which grew gradually—in my opinion not only from narrative images, but again directly from texts, in this case from Biblical texts. While the first, basically narrative method predominates in the pictures in Dura Europos and also in the earliest illuminated Bible fragments as in the Vienna Genesis,⁴ the second method prevailed in Christian art during the speculative era of the High Middle Ages. Such images found their place, above all, in liturgical books, in which lectures from the Bible are connected to symbolical rites, and also in the wall paintings within churches which are closely bound to liturgy.

A clear parallel between the image and the contemporary relationship to the Biblical text shows in the illuminations of the Bible. In the periods which concentrated on attempts at correcting and purifying the text and recovering the original versions, the illuminations reflect this trend to a great degree: they closely follow the Biblical text and leave aside pronounced theological speculations. This occurred in the St. Victor school in Paris in the 12th century. Here the exegetical works together with the formal revision of Stephen Langton⁵ gave rise to the “Paris Exemplum”. During the periods of the Proto-Reformation and Reformation such trend are again noticeable, as in Bohemia during the Pre-Hussite and Hussite era. The Paris Exemplum itself is a strong case of such a concept. Thirteenth century manuscripts from Paris and Western Europe contain illumination of only the initials of the individual Biblical books, and if these illuminations were figural, their iconography mostly adhered strictly to the incipits.⁶ I have tried to show on another occasion⁷ that this illumination

³ See note 1.

⁴ Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek Cod. Vindob. theol. graec. 31.

⁵ See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, Notre Dame, Indiana 1970, passim.

⁶ See R. Branner, *The Manuscript Painting in Paris during the Reign of Saint Louis*, Berkeley–Los Angeles–London 1977, p. 178–195. For this book, which was not available in Prague, I am obliged to Francois Avril and I thank him very much for it.

⁷ More detailed in Hana Hlaváčková, Relationship of Illuminations to the Bible Text in Pre-Hussite Era, in: *Umění XL*, 1992, p. 266–271.

of incipits is, as a principle, similar to the Hebrew names of Biblical books. These names are identical with incipits as an expression of an apparent anxiety to add anything to the sacred text: *v'ellé š'mot*—these are the names, or *vaj'jkrá el Moše*—He summoned Moses, and so on. In the Paris Exemplum version of Bible the incipits are illuminated in the same way.⁸ The explanation offered which suggests that these illuminations served to facilitate better orientation in the book, as in liturgical volumes, does not make sense here. The same motif of the Lord speaking from a cloud to an elected person is repeated many times and thus cannot be useful nor meant for orientation.

During the High Middle Ages numerous commentaries and homilies, often of high theological quality, became popular. Many of the explanatory and symbolical motifs growing out of this literature found their way into the illuminations of the Biblical text proper. Apart from these commentaries, new versions of the “re-written Bibles” appeared, which did not keep to the original wording of the sacred text and which in fact represented its slanted interpretation. The most prominent of these was the so-called *Biblia pauperum* which is based on typology connecting the New Testament stories to Old Testament ones—which were considered to have been their archetypes. Another was the “historicized” Bible or Bible moralize, which appended new texts to the Biblical ones. Borderline cases are represented by popular writings like the *Concordantia caritatis* or the *Speculum humanae salvationis* which is theologically mediocre, but which strongly influenced iconography especially in the lower strata of society.

“Image commentaries” would even prevail over the Biblical text proper which was sometimes reduced to a minimum—to mere glosses accompanied by drawn schemes with speculative iconography. The Bible of King Wenceslas IV (the king of Bohemia from 1362 to 1419 and a king of the Holy Roman Empire in 1376 to 1400), which is now kept in Vienna⁹ is notable precisely because it consistently followed the initial way of illuminating the Biblical

⁸ R. Branner, *The Manuscript Painting*, see note 6, and E. J. Beer, *Liller Biblecodices, Tournai und die Skriptorien der Stadt Arras*, in: *Achener Kunstblätter XLIII*, 1972, p. 192–203.

⁹ Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, cod. 2759–2764.

text: namely by illustrating in detail the text itself. While it contains the unabridged Biblical text, and illuminations that are astoundingly rich, there are more than 600 images illustrating the Old Testament one-aside from the copious images of figural scenes found in the margin. The miniatures occupy the width of one column from the two-column pages, and aside from minor exceptions, do not contain theological speculation. Similar is the absence of the usual medieval “typology” of the Old and the New Testaments and developments of the text in the way of a “commentary”. The commentary is, in fact, strongly present on the pages, but limited exclusively to the decoration of the margins. The system of decoration thus splits in two logical parts:

1) the miniatures, incorporated in their proper place in the Biblical text, which illustrate the text relatively rigorously without adding anything to it, and

2) the rich and interesting marginal decoration, which becomes a kind of commentary to it.

A great deal of attention has been given to the Bible of King Wenceslas IV in the past, but it has mostly concentrated on this latter aspect: the marginal images. Julius von Schlosser identified the system of unusual emblems as an expression of the courtly relationship between King Wenceslas and his second wife, Sophia of Bavaria, and he dated the manuscript within the years after their marriage of 1389.¹⁰ I have suggested, in difference from von Schlosser but following Josef Krása,¹¹ that these marginal images do not depict some courtly game of love between the king and the queen which would have nothing in common with the Bible, but that they represent a theological and cosmological allegory. An allegory based on the Patristic commentaries of the Creation of the world, above all, on the Hexahemeron of St. Ambrose and several medieval commentaries and encyclopedias following him all the way up to Comenius.¹² Only this latter, more personal

¹⁰ Julius von Schlosser, *Die Bilderhandschriften Königs Wenzel I.*, in: *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses*, vol. XIV., Wien 1893, pp. 214–251, 266–269.

¹¹ Josef Krása, *Die Handschriften König Wenzel IV.*, Prag 1971.

¹² Arguments have been published in: H. Hlaváčková, *Courtly Body in the Bible of Wenceslas IV*, in: *Künstlerischer Austausch, Acten des XXVIII. Internationalen Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte*, III, Berlin 1993, p. 371–382.

level of the marginal images is related to the personality of the sponsor, i.e. King Wenceslas and his court. However even on this personal level, the symbolical system of the margin images does not reflect some liberal courtly game, but rather the most personal expression of the king's *modern devotion*. It is clear from what I have said that the Bible of King Wenceslas IV does not follow the pattern of the Paris Exemplum which was common in Bohemia both during his time and later. The iconography of the initials of the individual books does not concern the incipits, and in some cases not even the Biblical text at all. These initials mostly belong into the second, symbolical level of images, which has its place in the borders and margins.

Julius von Schlosser¹³ considered Bohemia to have been an original culture, during that era being, founded on an integration of Slavic, German and Romanic elements and representing one of the peaks of contemporary Europe. It is possible to agree with his opinion, although nowadays we would rather formulate it more definitely as an integration of the universal Latin European culture with the local phenomenon of Prague's inhabitants. Prague's population was seasoned with both Czech and German nationals, and further enriched by contacts with the French and Italian centers. It is clear that Prague—and of course not only Prague—served as a cultural center precisely in those periods when it was not inclosed by nationalistic concerns. Schlosser and all his followers have, however, left out of their portrait an important part of the 14th century Bohemia—namely the culture of the local, and relatively numerous Jewish inhabitants. They have undoubtedly contributed to this integration as it played its role even in the courtly art work—in the Bible of King Wenceslas. The incumbent “international style”, which is a common name given to the unified European artistic style around the year 1400 was deeply rooted in Bohemia. It was fostered within the “European feeling” of the court of Wenceslas' father the Roman Emperor, Charles IV, and is exemplified in the Bible though the three languages present. The Bible itself is written in German—in *Hochmitteldeutsch*¹⁴—most probably in regard of Queen Johanna who was, in my opinion, the person for whom the Bible was originally in-

¹³ See note 10.

tended.¹⁵ Besides the above, three other languages take part in this Bible:

1) the instructions for painters are in Latin; they were erased along the painted miniatures but they remained along many of those that were not executed.

2) The inscriptions on floating bands in the margins are mostly written in Czech (in fact these sentences are variations on a single sentence, a so-called “devise”, which is considered enigmatic in spite of several attempts at an explanation), a minor part of this extensive marginal group is in German.

3) The inscriptions inside the illuminations proper are mostly Latin, some of them are German—and some are Hebrew. This fact has been overlooked not only by Schlosser and following bibliography, but also by the detailed (if somewhat popularly conceived) commentary written by H. Appuhn for the small facsimile edition of the Bible.

The painted decoration of the Bible is surprisingly rich. The part which has been completed and illuminated comprises the Books of Moses, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1st–4th Kings and 1st–2nd Chronicles, the final part of the 2nd Book of Chronicles was left without illuminations. All these parts seem to have comprised the original first volume (the different present division originated in the 18th century). The second volume opened with the Prayer of Manasseh in the role of a prologue and continued with the 1st–3rd Ezra. Beside the Prayer of Manasseh, only individual quires from the Books of Ezra and a minor part of Ecclesiasticus were illuminated. The following Prophets have been mostly written but they have no illuminations. Greater part of the written texts has the above mentioned prescriptions for painters. In those places where even these are missing, at least a free space for illuminations has been left out.

Biblical illustrations in the form of self-contained miniatures accompany the text with detailed narrative scenes, while their original composition often follows the detailed prescriptions. Typological aspect and theological symbolism are absent with one

¹⁴ The translation—the first one of the whole text into the German—was commissioned by Prague’s citizen Martin Rotlev in the early 1370, a short time after the first complete translation of the Bible into Czech.

¹⁵ See note 12.

exception and even some representations of basic teachings, which normally appear as a rule, are missing here, e.g. the image of Abraham in Mamre (the “Old Testament Trinity”). The one exception is the image of the Virgin Mary among virgins (who are without attributes and therefore probably represent the Virtues) in the place of the Sapientia in the Ecclesiasticus; Mary symbolizes the Throne of Divine Wisdom here. The image appears in the part of the Bible which is no more regularly illuminated.

There are more than 600 finished miniatures painted by several painters according to a unified iconographic program that defined with the help of a Latin prescription quite precisely each individual miniature. The miniatures depict Biblical stories in a way similar to the earliest manuscripts of Biblical fragments, still Late Antique in style, or to the wall paintings in the synagogue in Dura Europos. Several researchers tried, with different results, to identify individual hands. I think that it is impossible to formulate a precise attribution because several painters took part in painting one miniature in the framework of a workshop practice. I suggest, for instance, that the older “Balaam Master” executed the underdrawings for the first part of the extensive illuminating activity of Frana who seems to have been his pupil. An interesting clue to the attributions is provided by the language of inscriptions in the miniatures—in difference from the Czech and German inscriptions in the margins, they are mostly Latin or Hebrew, in the later parts also German inscriptions appear sporadically. The use of these languages is not subject to any system and it evidently depended on the person of the painter. The above mentioned Balaam Master wrote, e.g., his inscriptions on the tablets of Moses in Hebrew, while his younger collaborator Frana, who shared with him the decoration of the Books of Moses, wrote the same texts in Latin. The Balaam Master stylistically followed the Bohemian painting of the thirteen-sixties and he concentrated almost exclusively on individual figures, depicting with their help the complete action, while the environment is reduced only to the attributes which are necessary for understanding the story. This way of illustrating corresponds closely to the Biblical text with sparse depiction of environment and also to the paintings in Dura Europos—while it does not correspond to the earliest Greek manuscripts. There are no evident Jewish elements in the iconography of the Balaam Master who seems to have known He-

brew, because on this level of his work the painter was strictly bound by the prescriptions. He depicted, as all the other painters, the figure of the Lord fully incarnated, which is unthinkable in Jewish illuminations (the illuminations of Creation, e.g. in the Haggadah from Sarajevo, depicted the same motives of the seven days of creation, but without the figure of the Lord. In this connection it could be interesting, that the absence of the Lord reappears in some Bohemian manuscripts from the first half of the 15th century, i.e. from the time of the Hussite movement). On the other hand, a knowledge of Jewish realia could be noticed not only in the case of the Balaam Master (esp. his illuminations of the Leviticus), but also in the case of the illuminator of Esdra II (= Nehemia, 8, vol. III, f. 103v), which has been identified by Josef Krása as the Master of Willehalm. This master was also, like the Balaam Master, a member of the older generation of painters. On the other side, younger Frana, in the part that he executed without help of his older collaborator and probably teacher the Balaam Master, not only wrote the inscriptions on the tablets of the Decalogue in Latin, but he did not know even menorah, which he depicted as seven small lamps hanging from a tree (Numeri 8, vol. I, f. 140).