

# Embodying the Word

## PHYSICAL FORMS OF THE MEDIEVAL BIBLE

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### The University of Houston's manuscript collection boasts a

thirteenth-century Northern French "pocket"

Bible known as the Gwysaney Bible<sup>1</sup>. This little gem displays the main attributes of nearly every portable Bible produced in Western Europe during its century, making it an excellent example of the changes in Bible production that took place in that period.

Before the changes of the thirteenth century, Bibles were large, multi-volume affairs, the individual volumes being meant to sit on lecterns, altars, or refectory tables<sup>2</sup>. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and in some places into the thirteenth century, largeness was a favored characteristic, as a volume's physical presence lent it an aura of dignity, holiness, and credibility. Ceremonial uses of the Bible, such as taking it on processions on feast days, reinforced the physicality of its power. Before reading the sacred text, the reader (usually a priest or a monk) would kiss the volume and show his audience the opened pages. With the pages measuring about fifteen and a half inches by ten and a half inches, these lectern Bibles were intended to be read aloud for teaching, liturgical purposes, or communal devotion (as in the refectory of a monastery, where passages were read aloud while the monks ate), not employed

in private devotion or study. The decoration was carefully executed with wide audiences in mind.

The different books within the Bible could be read in any order, and twelfth-century audiences saw Scripture as a collection of texts, not a single work. One lectern Bible, with its several (usually four to five) volumes, could include a complete collection, known as a pandect. Components of a complete collection were the prologues to the books, attributed to St. Jerome; the Hebrew Bible; the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles; two or even three different versions of the Psalms; the books known as the Apocrypha; the Epistles; and the Book of Revelation. While Bible producers made efforts to ensure the accuracy of copies before the volumes left the site (usually a monastery or cathedral chapter house), they did not employ a standardized format until the development of the portable Bible industry, beginning in thirteenth-century Paris<sup>3</sup>.

From the turn of the thirteenth century, Bible production in Paris changed, probably due to the increased use of the Bible as a university text and to the demand for Bibles, especially portable ones, from the newly founded Dominican and Franciscan preaching orders (also called mendicant orders). For the first time, producers firmly established the names and order of the books and collected the books into one volume. Single-volume Bibles produced before the early 1200s are extremely rare. Division into numbered chapters appeared in the early thirteenth century as well (numbered verses were introduced in the sixteenth century), and this division is attributed to Stephen Langton, who lectured on the Bible in Paris before he drafted the Magna Carta in England.

Scholarship was the primary motivation behind these developments. University students enjoyed a more efficient learning experience with their own Bibles close at hand during lectures, and they did not hesitate to add their own commentaries, or glosses, in the margins of their pages. The Gwysaney Bible in the University of Houston's exhibit belonged to one such student or

scholar. Interestingly, the Gwysaney Bible's original commentaries have been largely removed by the trimming of the pages' bottom margins. Their replacement by attached strips of vellum bearing other commentaries suggests a subsequent owner's censorship of the original student's ideas. Later corrections and glosses, in hands dating from the late thirteenth to the seventeenth century, remain in the other margins.

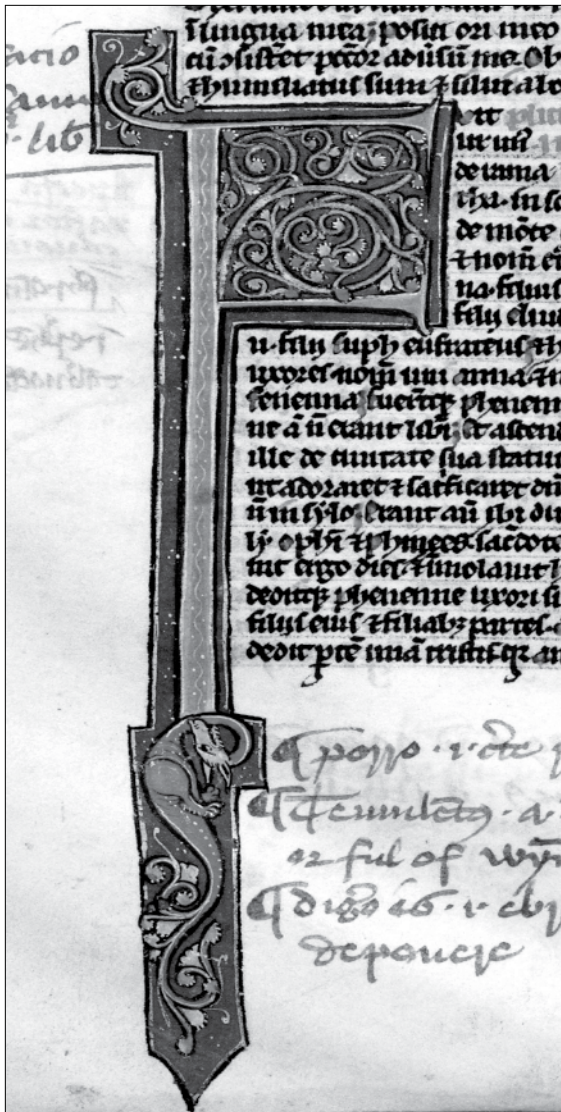
Censorship through standardization of the Biblical text was a priority of the Dominican masters at the university and the theological

school (opened in 1229) in Paris. The Dominicans' educational goal was to combat heresy, especially among future ecclesiastical and civic leaders. Bible scholarship was, therefore, of great importance to the Dominican universities not only in Paris but also in Bologna and Oxford. In addition, the size of the new Bibles made them easy for preaching friars to transport and read to their wide audiences. Presumably to meet this demand, Paris masters and stationers began producing portable Bibles around the same time as the opening of the theological school.

By the mid- to late thirteenth century, the portable Bible had become a bestseller, and these manuscripts are the most common surviving books from their century. While some artists and scribes worked at home, many Parisian artisans established workshops to produce Bibles and other books for students, such as liturgies, law books, and copies of the Decretals (a commentary on canon, or church, law). Production of thirteenth-century Bibles by religious orders was limited, and it is likely that only some Dominican friars and very few Franciscans created them. Franciscans were expressly forbidden to sell books that they produced. In Paris, booksellers commissioned new Bible manuscripts and subcontracted scribes to write them and professional illuminators to decorate them.

While the largeness and impressive physicality of the lectern Bible had ceremonial importance, practical concerns were paramount in the minds of portable Bible producers. To have a single-volume complete Bible, the pages had to be tissue-thin and were often made of the super-fine vellum, or calfskin, known as "uterine vellum" (due to the false notion that this skin was obtained from aborted calves). Additionally, the format of the text allowed for maximum use of space, with two columns of minute black script on each page. Page headings and red or blue initials marking chapters helped the reader to locate sections of the tiny text!

The Gwysaney Bible, created in Northern France between about 1250 and 1300, consists of



"Gwysaney" Bible. Northern France, ca 1250-1300  
University of Houston, Special Collections

uterine vellum, adheres to the two-column format, and displays red and blue numbers at chapter divisions. It is written, like other pre-Reformation Bibles, in the Vulgate translation attributed to the fourth-century St. Jerome. In its current binding, however, it is not a complete collection, containing only the prologues and most of the Old Testament. It lacks the last part of the Book of Job; the Psalms of David 1-9a, 149, and 150; and the entire New Testament, except for the prologue and first lines of St. Matthew's Gospel, which appear on the last leaf.

The decoration of the Gwysaney Bible conforms to the common practice of its day as well. Miniatures appear in white, red, and blue, with black outlines. Gilded initials consist of gold leaf overlying built-up gesso (plaster of Paris), a practice developed in the thirteenth century. While the original student must have appreciated the efficiency and practicality of his portable Bible's format, he surely enjoyed the interest and beauty of the thirty-four historiated, twelve zoomorphic, and many decorated initials. In the exhibit, the Bible is open to display one of these initials, decorated with a lively, colorful dragon in the customary palette of red and blue. This dragon is one of many romping through the manuscript's pages, making it clear that there was no theological problem with these otherwise infamous creatures inhabiting Bibles.

The owners' consistent enjoyment of the Gwysaney Bible was, unfortunately, one of the causes of its current disrepair. While the beauty of the decoration still shines, the observer cannot help but notice that generations of handling have left the manuscript in dangerously poor condition. The exhibit is one of the rare times that this Bible, like a delicate treasure guarded in a vault, is permitted to be opened and viewed<sup>5</sup>.

As an example of the ways in which Bible production shifted to include non-ceremonial physical attributes, the Gwysaney Bible demonstrates the practical as well as intellectual and spiritual concerns of the key patrons and

purchasers of thirteenth-century portable Bibles. Its beauty exemplifies the medieval aesthetic tradition of lavishly decorated Bibles, a tradition that modern producers sadly have had to leave behind. Nonetheless, we need only look at any modern Bible's format to see how the physical form of this sacred text remains largely unchanged.

<sup>1</sup> Bible, Vulgate version. Northern France, ca. 1250-1300 (University of Houston Special Collections, Gift of Frell Albright). The Bible is familiarly called the Gwysaney Bible because the second recorded owner of the manuscript, Robert Davies of Lannerch (1658-1710), was master of the Gwysaney estate and placed the Bible in the Gwysaney Library. His descendants sold the Bible to Mr. Frell Albright in 1969.

<sup>2</sup> The University of Houston exhibit includes an excellent example of the style used for lectern Bibles, a facsimile of the Bury Bible (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 2).

<sup>3</sup> Information about lectern Bibles can be found in Barbara A. Shailor, *The Medieval Book* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 75; Claire Donovan, *The Winchester Bible* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 10-11; and Christopher De Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1994), 118.

<sup>4</sup> Information about portable Bibles can be found in Shailor, 79-80; Donovan, 11-13; and De Hamel, 118-127.

<sup>5</sup> One of the exhibit's goals is to raise awareness of the Gwysaney Bible's need of a repair project. Those interested in learning more may contact the University of Houston Library's Special Collections department.