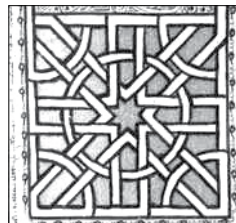


People of the Book

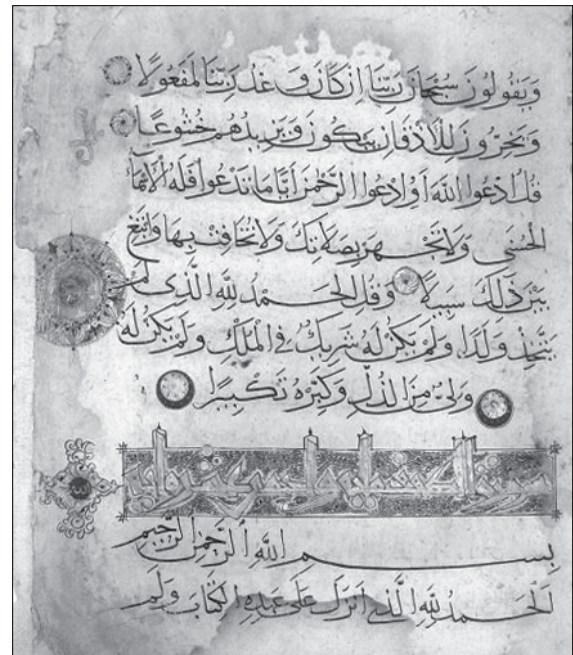
By Susan Khan

“People of the book” is what Muslims call Christians and Jews, meaning that they adhere to a revealed religion. In fact, not only do these three major monotheistic religions worship the same God (called by a different name), they all also believe in the sanctity of the written Word of God. All three of the Abrahamic faiths focus special attention on the writing of the Word in their particular book, called a Bible, a Gospel, or a Qur’an. Among the

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Gold Star Pattern
 Kennicot Bible (facsimile)
 On loan from Schachtel Library,
 Congregation Beth Israel
 Gift of Aron and Anaruth Gordon



Qur'an page. 11th century
 University of Houston, Special Collections
 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Stanley Marcus

major characteristics of these religions, the book is one of the most distinctive.

Judaism, the oldest of the three religions (dating from Moses in the thirteenth century BCE), was homeless for thousands of years. The Jews have been dispersed time after time, their lands taken, their property destroyed, their culture absorbed or diluted. Because Jewish culture has relied upon host countries, there is no uniquely Jewish artistic style. The arts of the Jews have instead been influenced by the arts and cultures of their various host societies and developed within multiple societies, cultures, and civilizations. The hosts' art has been influenced by Jewish tradition as well. Thus, Jewish art is not an "isolated, separate thread, but, on the contrary, a multicolored thread woven into the fabric of Jewish involvement in the larger non-Jewish society¹."

The word Torah usually refers to the scripture in scroll form used for liturgical purposes, containing the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Across the Diasporas, it has been the unchanging nature of the Torah that binds all Jews together wherever they may be. Because the Torah is always in scroll form and never decorated or illustrated, we will use the Jewish Bible (the body of scripture non-Jews call the Old Testament) for comparative purposes. The Diaspora in 135 CE resulted in the establishment of Jewish communities in Babylonia, Egypt, North Africa, Spain, Italy, Cologne, Constantinople, and the Levant. These communities assimilated into their host countries and cultures, learning the vernacular language and adapting to local customs. The diverse geographical regions where Jewish communities settled would eventually become Christian under the Roman Emperor Constantine. In Alexandria, Egypt, the Jews became so assimilated into their new homeland that they no longer could read Hebrew, and the Torah was translated into Greek². After the spread of Islam, many of the Jewish communities found themselves in Muslim host countries and were therefore influenced by the developing Islamic arts.

Parchment for Hebrew Bibles was prepared from kosher animals by the same method used by the local Christian parchment makers. The Jewish scribe used tools similar to non-Jewish scribes. Unlike a Christian scribe, however, he was not a member of a holy order, nor did he work in a scriptorium; rather, he worked in isolation in his own home³. An average medieval Near Eastern scribe would earn three gold dinars for about 570 large text pages. (In comparison, the average monthly income for a lower middle class family might be two gold dinars, and the cost of a garment would be about one dinar⁴.) It was considered a virtue for a scribe to copy his master's hand so perfectly that it became difficult to distinguish the student's work from the master's. Although scribes were a professional class, it is known from colophons that about a third of them were also doctors, goldsmiths, seal makers, cantors, butchers, teachers, and students. Along with his main profession, the scribe would include in the colophon not only his own name, but also the name of his father, perhaps his grandfather, the name of his patron or that it was written for himself. Colophons also included the city and date of completion. Hebrew manuscripts were often dated from the time of the Second Temple's destruction, ca. 68 CE, or from the Era of Dating Documents, ca. 312 BCE. In Europe, after the twelfth century, it became common practice to date from the Jewish traditional date of creation, 3761 BCE.

By the Middle Ages, Hebrew Bibles began to be illuminated, reflecting the style of the host country: figurative in Christian countries, non-figurative in Islamic countries. The scribes were almost certainly Jewish because in those countries where the Jews had adopted the vernacular, it was often written using the Hebrew alphabet. Occasional Hebrew instructions for illustrators indicate that there were also some Jewish artists. In Islamic countries, including medieval Spain, artists did not form rigid guilds, which would have limited membership in the profession, so Jews were able to become artists.

Regardless of whether the artist was Jewish or Muslim, in Islamic countries the decoration and illumination of Hebrew Bibles followed the Islamic style of decoration. It avoided the use of human or animal figures and relied instead upon abstract, vegetal, geometric, and architectural designs. The earliest dated illuminated Hebrew manuscript is from 895 CE and employs nearly identical decoration to that of Qur'ans from the same or a slightly earlier period⁵. Bibles were often decorated with carpet pages similar to Qur'anic decoration and had sectional headings similar to sura headings, reflecting knowledge and influence of the Islamic style or perhaps even the work of an Islamic artist⁶. Hebrew Bible carpet pages were often inspired by decorations on Islamic buildings, particularly tile patterns, as illustrated by the facsimile of the Kennicott Bible on display in this exhibit.

In Christian Europe, however, local trade and craft guilds were closed to Jewish artists⁷ and there were no major Jewish workshops⁸. Therefore, it was not unusual to find Christian illuminators working on Hebrew manuscripts. In spite of the misconception that Judaism is aniconic (prohibits figurative imagery), figural art was permitted as long as there was no danger of it being idolized, according to Maimonides' Code of Jewish Law. However, the depiction of God is always strictly prohibited. Thus, from European Christian influence, the Biblical picture cycle was introduced into Jewish book illustration⁹.

The most original and traditional decorative element of the Hebrew Bible was micrography. Minute Hebrew script formed shapes and pictures that seldom related to the text. The shapes reflected the host culture: geometric, vegetal, and architectural in Islamic countries, including Spain; symbolic or figurative in European Christian countries; and grotesques specifically in Ashkenazi (eastern European Jewish) texts¹⁰. The earliest dated examples are from the Moshe Ben-Asher Codex of the Prophets, ca. 895 CE. Micrographically decorated marriage contracts, *ketubbot*, date from the twelfth century¹¹. Medieval micrographers usually did not

sign their work, but detailed study can help ascribe works to particular hands.

The youngest of the major monotheistic religions is Islam. Uniquely, Islam is a religion without intermediaries of any nature: no clergy, no icons, no communion, and no confession. Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam recognizes the existence of heaven and hell, a day of resurrection, angels, the devil, and God's or Allah's boundless salvation. The written record of Allah's revelations to the Prophet Muhammad is the Qur'an, dating from the seventh century CE. From its origins on the Arabian Peninsula, Islam spread rapidly to encompass the areas west across North Africa during the seventh and eighth centuries and into Spain by the beginning of the ninth century, thereby coming into contact with and controlling many Jewish and Christian communities.

Arabs learned the craft of bookmaking from their Coptic, Byzantine, and Jewish predecessors. Islamic society was very active in commerce and highly literate, requiring many documents. Moslems used papyrus first, then added parchment and, in the ninth century, began manufacturing paper to replace papyrus. They often combined paper and parchment in a single text. However, animals killed to make parchment had to be slaughtered according to religious ritual requirements. Parchment was considered a luxury material, and the Arabs had methods for making especially fine vellum. They noticed that lime curing made tough parchment. By using dates in the soaking water, they achieved a particularly soft parchment¹².

The scribe's tools were naturally similar to those used by Jewish and Christian scribes. Muslim scribes, however, preferred their reed pens to be grown in the Nile or Tigris River, to be perfectly straight, and to have the length of one hand's width. They used two kinds of ink: soot based and tannin based. With soot, they used egg white as the adhesive to add luster. With tannin, they mixed pomegranate rind and egg white. Pure black ink was considered the finest, and yogurt or vinegar was added to it to retard the growth of mold. Arab

scribes had recipes for invisible ink and glow-in-the-dark ink, as well as erasure solutions¹³.

Qur'ans were never illustrated, but lavishly decorated with colored inks, gold leaf, and genuine lapis lazuli, as observers will note from the Qur'ans and Qur'an leaves on display. To affix the gold to parchment, they used fish and snail glue or honey mixed with gum. Brushes were made with very fine hairs from squirrels, kittens, mongooses, and the under-bellies of goats¹⁴.

Calligraphy was admired above all the arts of Islam, and calligraphers were highly respected. It was believed that nothing could be worthier than to write the Word of God. Fine calligraphy was an art unto itself with the letters taking on the role of images, whether they were written simply or elaborately intertwined and decorated. There were no calligrapher guilds, but books were published for scribes' education: *Craft of the Scribes* (tenth century), *Staff of the Scribes and Implements of the Discerning* (eleventh century), and *Writers' Aids and Intelligent People's Tools* (ca.1200)¹⁵. Scribes were often publishers, sellers, and authors as well as copyists. Students of great masters sometimes signed their masters' names instead of their own in the colophon, as a sign of respect. An Islamic colophon typically included the scribe's name, the date and place of completion, and blessings, or sometimes a curse against those who would destroy the book¹⁶.

It is a misconception that Islamic art is strictly aniconic. Figurative art does exist, but not in religious buildings or Qur'ans. Instead, in Qur'ans, decoration is vegetal, floral, and geometric. The twining of leaves and tendrils into a geometric repeating form is called arabesque because it is an invention of the Arabs. Designs are interlaced, infinite, intricate patterns. Qur'ans often contain lavish carpet pages or frontispieces and finispieces, and *sura* and verse headings. Marginal designs include palmates and medallions, as illustrated in the Qur'an leaf from the eleventh century on display. These marginal designs often include the name of Allah and were often used as visual reminders

for the reader to perform prostration. The earliest Qur'ans were in horizontal format; the change to vertical format occurred around the year 1000¹⁷. Blue and gold, as seen in the eleventh-century leaf, were favored colors in Qur'ans because they were said to represent the heavens and the stars.

Consider the Qur'an leaf illustrated with this essay, from the eleventh century. It contains the verse markings, medallions and palmates commonly used in medieval Qur'ans. Additionally, it shows beautiful use of the favored colors of gold and blue in the elaborate *sura* heading near the bottom of the page. The gold and ivory star detail, also illustrated here, seems like it should fit within this same text. The pattern is clearly reminiscent of Islamic tiles, centered on the eight-pointed star, with its intertwined gold design. In fact, this is a marginal detail from the Kennicott Bible, the fifteenth-century Spanish Sephardic (Jewish) manuscript exhibited here in facsimile. The Kennicott Bible has many details of Islamic influence, underscoring the cross-cultural influences.

When Judaism, Christianity and Islam bumped up against each other, cultures collided and coalesced. The art resulting from these co-existing cultures is a wonderful blend of East and West.

1 Joseph Gutmann, *Hebrew Manuscript Painting* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 12-13.

2 Leila Avrin, *Scribes, Script and Books: The Book Arts from Antiquity to the Renaissance* (London: The British Library, 1991), 105.

3 Avrin, 112-115.

4 Avrin, 126.

5 Gutmann, 15.

6 Avrin, 130-132.

7 Gutmann, 13.

8 Therese and Mendel Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Secaucus: Chartwell Books, 1982), 151.

9 Katrin Kogman-Appel, "Hebrew Manuscript Painting in Late Medieval Spain: Signs of a Culture in Transition," *Art Bulletin* (June 2002): 247.

10 Avrin, 136.

11 "Micrography," *Groveart* 7 (Nov. 2003).

Reproduction of micrography:
<http://www.almaleh.com/micro10-e.htm>.

12 Avrin, 261-264.

13 Avrin, 264-266.

14 Avrin, 266.

15 Avrin, 270-271.

16 Avrin, 272.

17 Richard Ettinghausen, Oleg Grabar and Marilyn Jenkins-Madina, *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 76.