

**Southeastern College Art Conference | December 8, 2020**  
**The St. John's Bible: Holding a Mirror Up to Life**  
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During the 2019 – 2020 academic year, Marian University hosted The St. John's Bible. As the lone art historian, I was tasked with research, interpretation, docent training, and several public presentations. However, as I became more acquainted with this Medieval-inspired, twenty-first century manuscript, research that began as a labor of employment transformed into a labor of love.

Donald Jackson, calligrapher to the Queen of England, envisioned of The St. John's Bible in 1995; he found a patron in the monks at St. John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. While this manuscript is a product of the twenty-first century, the twelfth-century Winchester Bible served as a model. In *The St. John's Bible: Holding a Mirror Up to Life*, I examine how The St. John's Bible collapses time—the past into the present—opening the viewer to the multilayered complexity of Medieval manuscript production in our modern world. I argue that The St. John's Bible, the first fully illuminated and hand-written Bible produced since the Middle Ages, creates art that mirrors life. By way of fossils, satellite images, modern disaster and disease, the images of The St. John's Bible re-frame social, political, and theological issues as significant expressions of mimetic art while exploring the power handwritten script and artfully-produced images still have over the viewer. With its illuminations that mirror life, The St. John's Bible asks viewers to consider what we are doing to Creation and where that will lead. Will we be able to look ourselves in the mirror?

Donald Jackson (1938 - present) is the official scribe and calligrapher of the United Kingdom. The skill of creating artful lettering intrigued him from a young age. He states: “When I was nine years old, desire led me to copying ancient scripts and decorated letters. I

loved the feel of the pen as it touched the page and the breathtaking effect of the flow of colored ink as its wetness caught the light” (*St. John’s Bible: Production*). With such passion for the art of calligraphy, it is no wonder that from 1998 until its completion in 2011, Jackson was the Artistic Director and principal illuminator of The St. John’s Bible. Over the last fifty years, Jackson has been widely acknowledged as a seminal influence on the growth of Western calligraphy. In 1995, he shared his dream to create a hand-written, illuminated Bible with Eric Hollas, a monk at St. John’s Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. A year later, with the millennium fast approaching, the project was launched. A team of scholars and theologians was selected, the Committee on Illumination and Text or CIT. The CIT gathered weekly to 1) determine which passages to illuminate 2) develop the theological content behind the illuminations and 3) identify the underlying themes for the artists to incorporate. Thus, The St. John’s Bible began to take shape as the team wrestled with how to newly reveal the timeless Word of God. Firstly, this team decided that The St. John’s Bible would reconnect with the “symbolic system and mystery that existed prior to the Enlightenment” and secondly the team posited that “if handwriting the Bible, in the twenty-first century, were worth anything, it would have to be more than just grand project destined to sit on a shelf.” This committee determined that The St. John’s Bible would have to “address issues of the day, explore art, music, literature, science, raise questions of justice, speak to other faith traditions, and be hospitable to other people of good will” (Homrighausen ix). It would have to be a mirror on the world; it would have to look into the past for tradition, reflect the present in all its complexity, and see a future where greater understanding results from the interrelationship of all three.

Though The St. John’s Bible is a product of the twenty-first century, its inspiration comes from the Medieval past, specifically the twelfth-century Winchester Bible (Calderhead 83). The

Winchester Bible (1150 – 1175) was likely commissioned by Henry de Blois (1096 – 1171), brother of King Stephen (1092/1096 – 1154), abbot of Glastonbury, and Bishop of Winchester from 1129 until his death in 1171. At three-feet tall, its dimensions were the maximum size parchment production would allow, making it the largest surviving twelfth-century English Bible. The St. John's Bible's size, at 2' X 3', achieves the same effect. Moreover, the Winchester Bible was intended to engender awe and wonder, to outshine all other glorious manuscripts. The most recognizable page, the *Morgan Leaf*, with scenes from the lives of Samuel on the recto and of King David on the verso, achieves this goal. Likewise, Jackson's inspiration to create illuminations that engender awe and wonder is evident, with their explosive use of gold and complex imagery, in such images as *The Birth of Christ* (Gospel of Luke) or *The Word Made Flesh* (Gospel of John).

Like the creators of Winchester Bible, Jackson used traditional materials and techniques. Such materials included pages made of calf-skin (vellum from Cowley's in Newport Pagnell, Wales), hand-cut quills, gold and silver (platinum) leaf. Though Jackson employed the traditional approach of hand-lettering the entire work, he created a new script for this project to ensure it was both legible and elegant. Two additional features the Medieval scribe did not have at his or her disposal include computer-aided layout and stamps, such as the cosmic diagram in the background of *Ruth and Naomi* from the Book of Ruth, made from a computer-generated image. In combining traditional materials and techniques with non-traditional approaches, The St. John's Bible begins to reveal how it collapses time, the past into present.

While The St. John's Bible's inspiration is rooted in the Medieval past, so too is the idea of the mirror that it holds up to the world. During the Middle Ages, mirrors, in the form of convex mirrors, became powerful, cultural symbols—metaphors of self-knowledge. This convex

form meant that it showed something of the viewer's surroundings, a wider frame than the traditional flat mirror of later invention. Owing to that optical 'feature,' such mirrors were used for scrying, a form of divining by staring into a reflective surface. At its most banal, scrying was used to find out what one's enemies were up to or to answer questions like the "mirror, mirror on the wall." However, the practice of scrying was actually performed to discover significant messages or revelations (Hall 35). As The St. John's Bible acts as a metaphorical mirror, looking into the past and reflecting the present, its text and images convey significant messages, the result of literally and figuratively contemplating its reflective surface. These messages revolve around the social justice themes of 1) Creation care 2) right relations with all people and 3) resituating women in the Biblical narrative. In so doing, the Bible sees a future with hope and through its images reveals a greater understanding of self and others.

The mirror, as a literal and metaphorical reference, is evident in *Wisdom Women* (Jackson, 2006) from the Wisdom of Solomon. For the Wisdom Books, Jackson and the CIT concentrated on Wisdom Woman, also known as Sophia. Historically, Wisdom is frequently embodied as a woman. Here, Wisdom is depicted as an old woman, surrounded by a silver mirror, grinning at the viewer. Her smile and her age convey self-knowledge. The mirror-shaped illumination alludes to Wisdom 7:26, which describes Wisdom Woman as "a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of goodness" (Homrighausen 70). The moon, which is traditionally feminine, in the form of its twenty-eight phases is rendered around the edges of the mirror. In the four corners, of the outer frame, are renderings based on pictures from the Hubble telescope, pointing to the cosmic nature of Wisdom (Sink 132). And while gold, throughout The St. John's Bible, represents the presence of God, silver represents Wisdom Woman (Homrighausen 68 – 70). Therefore, the silver and gold bars allude to the presence of

God and Wisdom Woman. Wisdom Woman, as a companion of God in the Old Testament, becomes Jesus, the Son of God in the New. The St. John's Bible makes this connection through associating the astronomical imagery in the four corners of the mirror in *Wisdom Woman* with the explosive background in *The Word Made Flesh* (Homrighausen 68 – 70). And so, in literally and metaphorically holding the mirror up the world, the reader understands Wisdom working in it— past, present, and future.

Complicating collapsing the past into the present is the image of *Creation* from the Book of Genesis. In Michael Patella's *Word and Image*, the author argues that the most controversial passages in all of Sacred Scripture are the creative passages in Genesis (Patella 84). These passages outline the creation of the cosmos over six days. However, modern, evolutionary biology has shown it took billions of years for the earth to form. For many, states Patella, these first chapters “scratch the line in the sand between believers and atheists. Either we believe in God and hold to the creation of the universe as literally described in Genesis or we stand with the secular humanists and declare God a hoax” (Patella 85). The CIT sought to rectify these two positions. This image chooses to look into the past and reflect what the scientists know in the present. It reveals a significant new message based on the knowledge of the world within and beyond the metaphorical mirror.

In *Creation* (Jackson and Tomlin, 2003), the viewer notes the past dissolving into the present. The image is made up of seven vertical bands. In Panel 1, God, imagined as the Big Bang, breaks into the cold, empty chaos. Panel 2 represents separating the waters and air by the creation of the sky. In Panel 3, the creation of land is depicted by incorporating a satellite photo of the Ganges Delta. Using this photo provides a visual reference to modern science. The sun, moon, and stars appear in Panel 4. Panel 5 bursts with life, as fish come upon the scene before

anything else; scientists theorize that all forms of life on earth originated in the sea. This panel acknowledges that detail by using fossil images of now extinct fish. In Panel 6, God creates the land animals and humans. Here, Prehistoric cave paintings supply the human images, as a way to acknowledge our evolutionary ancestors, folding time. In this detail, note the inconspicuous design of the snake; it will make a more dramatic appearance in *Adam and Eve*. Finally, in Panel 7, God rests (Patella 85 – 88). As the reader contemplates this visual rendering of Creation, the image fulfills expectations but allows for complexity. It holds up a convex mirror to the world as it helps the reader see beyond the traditional frame, the Biblical-based, literal understanding of Creation, and into a present lived experience. Meaning, the image allows the reader to connect the theological and evolutionary past to the present, to divine a new understanding of God's message informing a future where neither science nor faith are prioritized over the other.

In Jackson's *Genealogy of Jesus* (Jackson, 2002) from the Gospel of Mathew and the *Suffering Servant* (Jackson, 2010) from Isaiah, the artist and the CIT reimagine how other faiths and cultures are reflected in the Biblical narrative. The *Genealogy of Jesus* was the first illumination Jackson completed setting the tone for the rest of the project. In it, the reader encounters a powerful affirmation of Judaism. Jackson focuses Christianity's relationship with Judaism through the menorah using it as the shape of Jesus' family tree. Jackson states, "My idea was to suggest a bridge between the Old Testament and the New, so I used the menorah as a foundation of the design to acknowledge Christianity's Jewish roots" (Homrighausen 17). This illumination emphasizes Christianity's debt to Judaism and Jesus's Jewish heritage. The DNA strands, between the arms of the menorah, point to passing on Jewish identity. They also remind the reader that Jesus was flesh-and-blood with human DNA. The DNA is seen, by some, as making the Jewish faith extant in all people.

The illumination also hints at dialogue with religions beyond Judaism. The menorah contains mandala patterns from Tibetan Buddhism. The flames allude to arabesques from Islamic art. In the center, the gilded stamps suggest illuminations from the Quran. Sarah's name is written in Hebrew. Hagar's name is written in both Hebrew and Arabic. Referencing these visual allusions, Jackson states, "I wanted to draw out a kinship with other spiritual teachers" suggesting the "connectedness of all seekers of enlightenment" (Homrighausen 17). The image is an example of actualization, bridging the gap between the Bible's time and our own, collapsing the past into the present, to divine a more equitable future from the wider historical and theological space in which the reader lives.

The image of the *Suffering Servant*, based on Isaiah 53: 3 -13, also reflects a new visual interpretation of the sacred text. This passage speaks of the trials undergone by a Servant of God, "despised and rejected by others; a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity." The identity of this Suffering Servant remains a mystery. Jewish tradition sees the Servant as Israel, the Messiah, Jeremiah, or Moses. New Testament writers applied the image to Jesus building on pre-Christian Jewish interpretation that saw the Servant as the coming Messiah (Homrighausen 41). Jackson could have illuminated the Suffering Servant with a clear iconographic reference to Jesus. He does not. Instead, he produces an image that works on Jewish, Christian, and literal levels. Note, at the bottom, the ram's head, comparing the Suffering Servant to a sacrificial lamb of Isaiah 53:7. Above the gate is a Christian symbol, a tau cross. On the literal level, Jackson relates the Suffering Servant to contemporary examples of people undergoing persecution. His servant is a starving African child. The child stands in the Gate of No Return at Elmina Castle in Ghana, through which enslaved people were forced to board boats bound for the New World (Homrighausen 42). Again, this image bridges the gap between the Bible's time and the world in

which the reader lives collapsing the past into the present and challenging the reader to adopt a wider view of his or her surroundings that envisions a future world where compassion extends to all people, of all faiths and races.

To see a future where compassion extends to all people, The St. John's Bible's CIT focuses on the "the neglect of women's full incorporation into the people of God" (Homrighausen 46). In response, The St. John's Bible foregrounds women's experience and their witness inserting them where they may not have been explicit in the narrative (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. Pope John Paul II, April 23, 1993). Some of the reoccurring metaphors that reference women include bright, colorful fabric patterns and shining silver. The choice of textiles symbolizes the importance of women in creating textiles in ancient Israel. Textiles are symbolic of interconnectivity in that just as interweaving threads join to make a whole, women weave together families and communities. Silver alludes to the moon and Wisdom Woman. Interlacing these allusions through all seven volumes, results in women being consistently present, a constant reflection in humanity's mirror.

Of all the women who are recorded in the Bible, Eve is the most recognizable. At first glance, as seen in *Adam and Eve* (Jackson, 2003) from the Book of Genesis, The St. John's Bible seems to reflect the traditional account of Eve as a temptress. The image depicts Eve behind Adam surrounded by a bright textile border. The textiles hint that Eve is at the center of this story. Eve's face is in color and radiating more light compared to the shadowy Adam. Eve grins; Adam grimaces. He looks dead, dull, vacuous. The coral snake, first seen in the *Creation* image, has entirely over taken Eve. In his *Illuminating Justice: The Ethical Imagination of the St. John's Bible*, Jonathan Homrighausen argues that the snake imagery and Eve's smile are unclear. The image may capture the moment after Eve has eaten the apple but Adam has yet to



nibble (Homrighausen 48). Homrighausen's advances the theory that Eve's grin represents the joy of one who had found knowledge, one who had discovered the difference between good and evil (Homrighausen 49). Thus, Adam's gray face would not be the result of the Fall but the dullness of one who had yet to become fully human. To further challenge the reader's preconceived understanding of the Genesis story, Adam and Eve are represented not as Caucasian but closer in appearance to the earliest humans. And so, the reader is encouraged to take a wider view, to reach a new understanding of self, by looking into a very different mirror.

That very different mirror extends from the opening book of Genesis through the Book of Revelation. From Mozarabic manuscripts and Romanesque tympanum sculpture to the work of Albrecht Dürer, John of Patmos's vision of apocalyptic destruction has inspired Christian artists for centuries. Owing to that history, this book is one of the most elaborately illuminated of The St. John's Bible. In the text itself, the Four Horsemen bring conquest, war, famine, and death. In *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Jackson, 2011), Jackson translates these into visual symbols more relevant to our times—oil rigs, tanks, streptococcus bacteria, nuclear reactor symbols. However, in this, and all other Revelation illuminations, Jackson interleaves rainbow imagery as a reminder of God's promise not to wholly destroy the world (Sink 321 – 323). But, what of humans? This illumination asks us to consider what we are doing to God's Creation and where that will lead.

Consider as well the image entitled *To the Ends of the Earth* (Jackson, 2002) located at the end of the Bible but representing Acts 1:8 and 13:47. In Acts 1:8, the risen Jesus tells his disciples that "you will receive the power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and *to the end of the earth*." Today, scientists have charted not only the surface of our planet but other planets as well. So, what does

“to the ends of the earth” mean? To encourage the reader to consider that question, Jackson incorporates an expanded view of creation. On the left, he places an image of the Blue Marble taken from Apollo 8 in 1968. On the right, he includes the 1997 Hale-Bopp comet (Patella 277). And it even seems someday scientists might find extraterrestrial life. Currently, there is a creature called a tardigrades surviving on the moon, left after Israel’s Beresheet Lander crashed landed. Tardigrades fossils have been found from over 500 million years ago. Are they part of Creation? What responsibility do we have to care for these creatures as part of the entirety of Creation? As the St. John’s Bible widens our view and understanding, the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and *To the Ends of the Earth* bid us to consider both of those questions.

Through its images, the reader of The St. John’s Bible enters into a microcosm of text and image that reflects the macrocosm of Creation and revelation. Collapsing time, it holds a mirror up to the world, not the traditional flat variety, but a Medieval convex type. With its wider view of the space in which the reader lives, the convex mirror allows for a modern exercise in Medieval divining. Divining, by way of the St. John’s Bible, means detecting the significant messages and deeper revelations of what it means to be human. As the human species, we learned a long time ago the world is not flat. On a round surface, there is no falling off, just next steps. The St. John’s Bible, as it re-envisions the timeless Word of God, challenges the reader to consider those next steps. Do we continue to live out our same short-sighted history of mistreating the environment and each other or do we reflect anew on its text and visuals so we can look ourselves in the mirror.

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