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Dunham Bible Museum

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“Creation: Genesis” from the Saint John’s Bible

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Medieval and Modern: Illuminating Creation in the Saint John’s Bible

## Medieval and Modern: Illuminating Creation in the Saint John's Bible

The Saint John's Bible is a massive and unprecedented undertaking in theological craftsmanship. It represents a return to the medieval form of transcription. The script is written with quill pen and ink; the images are painted from pigments mixed with egg yolk and water, and all of the pages incorporate gold leafing to illuminate God's Word. It is an impressive feat of faith and artistry; still, the last illuminated bible was made five hundred years ago. Continuing the tradition of the medieval bible now, as expensive and time-consuming as it is, begs the question of why. Why was another illuminated Bible made in the world of the modern printing press and online access to scripture? What prompted the monks at Saint John's to craft such a beautiful and intricate version of the Scriptures?

The first plans for the Saint John's Bible began in the mid-to-late 1990's. The monks of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota set themselves to the task of funding and creating a bible that resembles sacred texts like the Book of Kells and the Uta Codex. However, the team was clear that their intention was not merely to replicate the medieval bible: "In fact, from the beginning of the project, the Committee on Illumination and Text (CIT)—the group...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" (Patella 385). This decision was especially poignant in light of the team's goal to appeal to modern sensibilities. The Saint John's Bible "call[s] upon the capabilities of the human imagination to expand and grow...[and] to utilize the discoveries and cultural touchstones of contemporary society" (385). The artistry therefore appeals to modern knowledge where a pastiche piece might have merely copied the medieval tradition. The team then went a step further and included modern imagery that better represents the incorporeality of spiritual warfare. The Bible and its artists create "a visual

vocabulary for the 20<sup>th</sup> century by their choice of modern imagery,” such as representing Adam and Eve as Ethiopian tribesmen and using a double helix to represent DNA in Christ’s genealogy (Trafton 64). The use of modern icons and imagery complement the sacred texts, and even elevate them, by allowing for multiple forms of expression to occur simultaneously. By giving a visual pathway into biblical text, the Saint John’s Bible creates new opportunities for evangelical and religious expression through images that encapsulate and venerate their respective scriptures.

Donald Jackson, the artist of the Saint John’s Bible, was drawn to the project after seeing the importance the monks at Saint John’s Abbey placed on the creation of “their bible.” Jackson aligned with their vision “to create a bible that would capture the beauty and tradition of centuries of liturgy and carry it into the future” (“The Saint John’s Bible”). He approached Saint John’s Abbey with the offer to script the Bible in 1995, and he wrote the first words of the Bible on Ash Wednesday of 2000. The Bible was completed and presented in 2006, and a museum-quality reproduction, dubbed the heritage edition, was finished in 2011 (“The Saint John’s Bible”). Before the Bible was commissioned, clear guidelines were established to determine the trajectory of the project. Jackson and his team agreed upon six goals and principles to guide the creation process: they wished to ignite the imagination of the reader, to glorify God’s Word through illustration, to revive the monastic tradition of the Middle Ages, to engage in historical discovery, to foster the arts, and to give a voice to the underprivileged and marginalized (“The Saint John’s Bible”). The Bible is therefore more than a single piece of art; it is a community undertaking of spirituality and artistry that culminates into a medieval bible for the modern ages.

A heritage edition of this Bible is on display in the Dunham Bible Museum. One of the pages being displayed is Jackson’s painted page for Genesis, titled “Creation,” which paints the seven days of creation as intricate vertical strips. The principles of both art and artist are on

display here; the first day of creation is dark and chaotic, with tongues of fire that hearken back to God's first commandment, "let there be light." The bottom left features the Hebrew words, "formless and void," representing the world before the commandment. The first day displays light and darkness being held in contention, separated both by God and by their place in the creation story. The second day similarly juxtaposes sky and sea as a microcosm for the worldly division. Both sea and sky are notably chaotic, with choppy swirling patterns underneath a pale dotted sky. The third day uses satellite images of the Ganges Delta, a prominent river in the Bengal region of South Asia, to represent the division between land and water. Several other pieces in the bible use similarly modern images to represent ancient ideas; the illustration of a crowd at Pentecost, for example, was based on images of spectators from a Saint John's University football game (Trafton 64). These allusions and influences allow for greater accuracy and insight into the biblical narrative through modern sensibilities. "Creation" uses current technology and historical knowledge to build on the ancient understanding of the Biblical narrative.

The fourth day of "Creation" is more literal and traditional; the night sky reveals the greater and lesser light, with the moon depicted as lower and duller. A bird appears in the center of the painting, flying from the third to the fifth day. The bird is a raven, which is commonly held to be the carrier of God's message to Saint Benedict and is a symbol of God's provision for His creation. For the sixth day, Jackson took inspiration from Aboriginal rock paintings to create human-like silhouettes. The birds from the fifth day trail off into the sky above, and a coral snake can be seen at the bottom of the sixth day to represent the serpent who would later tempt Eve. The seventh contains the largest example of illumination in the piece; the use of gold signifies God's glory and the peaceful rest that follows His creation. These gold squares are also

interspersed throughout the days, representing God's majesty and influence throughout the creation process.

“Creation” exemplifies the mission of, and passion behind, the whole of the Saint John's Bible. Donald Jackson and the team at Saint John's Abbey gave themselves a challenging task that was only possible through the guidance and grace of God. Jackson himself considers the process “the closest I have ever been to God,” and the Bible is currently featured at schools, churches, libraries, and museums around the country (“The Saint John's Bible”). “Creation” encapsulates the Bible's mission to marry modern and medieval, to embody monastic tradition, and to make the Word of God accessible to a new generation of followers of Christ. It is truly exciting to consider that this is only the beginning of the Saint John's Bible.

## Works Cited

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