

[Recepción del artículo: 11/06/2021]  
[Aceptación del artículo revisado: 26/08/2021]

**SCRIPTURAL TIME AND PAINTED TEXT IN THE FIRST BIBLE OF  
CHARLES THE BALD**  
**TIEMPO ESCRITURARIO Y TEXTO PINTADO EN LA PRIMERA BIBLIA DE  
CARLOS EL CALVO**

BEATRICE KITZINGER  
Princeton University, Dept. of Art & Archaeology  
bkitzinger@princeton.edu  
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-2821-6749

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes the major figural initials in the First Bible of Charles the Bald (Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 1), appearing at Exodus, Ruth, Tobias, Isaiah, Judith, and the general Prefaces. It suggests how these compositions fit into the visual and poetic program of the manuscript as a whole, emphasizing how the initial compositions relate to exegetical conceptions of reading, and reflect upon the bible's status as material text.

KEYWORDS: Bible illumination, figural initials, material text, typology, exegesis.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las principales capitales figuradas de la Primera Biblia de Carlos el Calvo (Paris, BnF, Ms. Lat. 1), correspondientes al inicio respectivo de Éxodo, Ruth, Tobías, Isaías, Judith, y los Prefacios generales. Se razona cómo estas composiciones se insertan en el programa visual y poético del manuscrito como un todo, destacando cómo las composiciones de las capitales se relacionan con concepciones exegéticas de la lectura, reflejando además el estatuto de la Biblia como texto material.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Biblias iluminadas, iniciales figuradas, texto material, tipología, exégesis.

Although they often play second fiddle to the complex scenic frontispieces, the figural initials of the Turonian bibles are integral to the interpretive approach to written scripture

brokered by painting in that grand project of ninth-century book production.<sup>1</sup> As Kessler recognized in his analysis of Paul's presence in the Moutier-Grandval Bible and the First Bible of Charles the Bald, the vignettes chosen for the initials sometimes communicate robust exegetical positions, key to specific arguments that play out across multiple elements of the program.<sup>2</sup> More broadly, the conjunction of figure and letter speaks equally in its fundamental form and in particular compositions to the bibles' extended, multifaceted meditation on written scripture as a medium. I contribute here another look at the initials of the First Bible, with a focus on how their compositions orchestrate a reading of biblical stories as material texts. In this, I call upon several motifs Kessler has made elemental to the field: the malleability and interpretive muscle of narrative forms; the self-reflexive theme in early medieval art; and the myriad ways pictorial form and the functions of images intertwine in Carolingian painting.

I will begin with a word about the style of the First Bible initials. To contextualize the so-called «silhouette style» in which the initials were painted it is useful to back up and approach the First Bible via the Bamberg Bible of 834–843, which announces several first principles in the extended project of bible illumination developed at Tours.<sup>3</sup> To begin with, the Bamberg Bible inaugurates the line of bibles structured by frontispieces. (Fig. 1) In the splendid book that became the First Bible of Charles the Bald, gifted to the king in 845, the frontispiece set encompasses a prefatory image of Jerome's work on the Vulgate, followed by full-page paintings for Genesis, Exodus, the Psalms, the Gospels, the Epistles, and *Revelation*; plus the famous dedication image.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, in its provision of a frontispiece only for Genesis and the Gospels (ff. 7v and 339v), Bamberg concentrates the characterization of written scripture asserted by Tours painters in each of their ventures—namely, the simultaneous distinction and intimate dialogue of Christian scripture and its forerunner.

Anne-Orange Poilpré named the key dynamic in the formal shift between the Old and New Testament frontispiece designs in the Turonian tradition: a distinction between modes of figuration (narrative / non-narrative) chimes with a distinction between modes of reading (historical / exegetical).<sup>5</sup> The Genesis images read in strict sequence, left to right, down several

<sup>1</sup> Contemporary study of the Turonian Bibles, and especially the frontispieces, is built on Herbert Kessler's foundation: H.L. KESSLER, *The Illustrated Bibles from Tours*, Princeton, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> H.L. KESSLER, "An Apostle in Armor and the Mission of Carolingian Art", and Id., "A Lay Abbot as Patron: Count Vivian and the First Bible of Charles the Bald", both reprinted in *Studies in Pictorial Narrative*, London, 1994, pp. 207–248, pp. 249–301, respectively; also Id., "Facies bibliothecae revelata: Carolingian Art as Spiritual Seeing", in *Spiritual Seeing: Picturing God's Invisibility in Medieval Art*, Philadelphia, 2000, pp. 149–189.

<sup>3</sup> The Bamberg Bible is Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Bibl. 1 [A.1.5]; it has been ascribed to Tours' brother abbey at Marmoutier. See G. SUCKALE-REDLESEN, *Die Handschriften des 8.–11. Jahrhunderts der Staatsbibliothek Bamberg*, Wiesbaden, 2004, pp. 26–30. The manuscript has been fully digitized: urn:nbn:de:bvb:22-dtl-0000098100.

<sup>4</sup> The First Bible of Charles the Bald is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF), Ms. lat. 1. P.E. DUTTON, H.L. KESSLER, *The Poetry and Paintings of the First Bible of Charles the Bald*, Ann Arbor, 1997. To view details of the initials in high resolution it is recommended to consult the digitized manuscript: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8455903b>.

<sup>5</sup> A.-O. POILPRÉ, «La visibilité de Dieu dans les bibles carolingiennes», in *Les manuscrits carolingiens: actes du colloque de Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, le 4 mai 2007*, J.-P. CAILLET, M.-P. LAFFITTE (eds.), Turnhout, 2009, pp. 185–202; see also EADEM, «Figurer l'Ancien Testament dans la Bible chrétienne à l'époque carolingienne. (Re) composer le temps et l'histoire,» in *Les stratégies de la narration dans la peinture médiévale. La représentation de l'Ancien Testament aux IV<sup>e</sup>–XII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, M. ANGEBEN (ed.), Turnhout, 2020, pp. 47–66.



Fig. 1. Bamberg Bible, Bamberg, Staatsbibliothek, Msc. Bibl. 1, f. 7v. Genesis frontispiece, Marmoutier, 834–43, 47 x 35.5 cm. Photo: Staatsbibliothek Bamberg.

registers. As such, they embody the notion of scripture's literal level, often closely associated with the Old Testament. The *Maïestas* that introduces the gospels, by contrast, is not a narrative composition. The image of Christ, the evangelists, and the prophets performs interpretive, exegetical work—like the senses of scripture beyond the historical—revealing deep structures of cosmology and temporality.<sup>6</sup> Crucially, in a full bible, distinct as they are the two images work as counterparts; the physical form of the codex argues for their continuity and reciprocity.

Distinction and reciprocity granted, the Bamberg frontispieces are actually unified within the program through their manner of painting. The Bamberg Bible was painted in the manner Wilhelm Koehler dubbed «silhouette style,» where metallic paint fills the figures, which are then often detailed in fine red and brown ink. Unlike the varied palette and modeled, painterly contours of the frontispiece work in the later bibles, silhouette painting blurs the

<sup>6</sup> See, fundamentally, B. KÜHNEL, *The End of Time in the Order of Things: Science and Eschatology in Early Medieval Art*, Regensburg, 2003.

line between writing and figuration—particularly in books wholly or partially written in gold ink.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the figural contents, the technique begins building an analogy between visual composition and forms of reading, because it implicitly allies the projects of writing and picturing throughout the manuscript in which it appears.

The Bamberg Bible Genesis, in particular, suggests direct give-and-take between words and images, because traversing the linear organization of the vignettes both approximates reading itself, and proceeds in concert with the actual reading of interspersed *tituli* written in gold. The painter introduced a good deal of dramatic and typological interpretation through iconographic detail and the considered use of materials,<sup>8</sup> but compared with the equivalent image in the First Bible (f. 10v), the continuity of metallic ink among the titular verses and the figures creates an even tighter interchange between the verbal and the visual. When precious writing and precious images share their aesthetic and technique, another theme of combined continuity and distinction emerges, beyond the unities of scriptural content—that is, interchange between the verbally and visually mediated aspects of material text.

The Bamberg Bible is alone among the surviving Tours bibles in using silhouette painting for full-page images. In the frontispieces of the later Moutier-Grandval Bible and the First Bible, the rich palette and modeled figures rather signal a shift of mode between image and text.<sup>9</sup> However, the painters maintained an interest in exploring close interchange between figures and letters, for both later books incorporate populated initials. The First Bible initials are rendered consistently in metallic silhouette. On the premise that such initials are charged sites of interlock between the verbal and the visual, I will now turn to the scenic initials of the First Bible and explore their orchestration of biblical text.

Perhaps in accordance with the point that visual narrative in the Old Testament frontispieces plays counterpoint to iconic compositions for the New, scenic vignettes appear in the First Bible initials only in the Old Testament section.<sup>10</sup> The selection principles and the

<sup>7</sup> Koehler used the term “Metallisierung” to describe the predominance of gold and silver ink in Tours illumination, positing that the silhouette images were developed as part of a push to assimilate figuration to the same visual priorities as the lettering. W. KOEHLER, *Die karolingischen Miniaturen*, vol. I: Die Schule von Tours, I,2, Berlin, 1930, p. 101. Hereafter abbreviated *KM I*. On metallic painting, see now J.S. Ackley and S.L. Wearing (eds), *Illuminating Metalwork: Metal, Object, and Image in Medieval Manuscripts*, Berlin, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Adam, for instance, begins in gold and turns silver when he and Eve become a couple before God. Both are steadily silver—like the serpent—after the Fall, although gold in contrast to the snake at the crucial moment before eating the fruit. Eve turns gold again at the very end, when she occupies a profile, enthroned position that likens her to Mary and the Child waiting for the Magi. Kessler and Dutton note analogous identification of Eve with Mary in the First Bible Genesis frontispiece: DUTTON, KESSLER, *Poetry and Paintings*, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> The rendition of the frontispieces in the First Bible on separate leaves adds a physical, processual separation in the production process as well. See *KM I*.1, p. 399; DUTTON, KESSLER, *Poetry and Paintings*, pp. 48–50. The Moutier-Grandval Bible is London, British Library, Additional MS 10546.

<sup>10</sup> The gospels include no scenic vignettes, although some small figures provide gentle glosses on the origin of the texts. A standing Jerome preaches from the central margin of the *Plures fuisse* preface, positioned just below his name inscription that signals the contents of the page (f. 325r). Three evangelists’ symbols appear closely allied with their initial letters (ff. 340r, 347r, 358v). Matthew’s symbol is omitted, but as his gospel beginning faces the *Maiestas*, reiterating the angel was possibly deemed redundant (ff. 329v–330r). For the Petrine letters (f. 380r), a hand with keys indicates Peter’s attribute. At Romans, a building abbreviates the idea of Paul writing to a community in the far-away city (f. 387r).

form of these vignettes vary, which can testify to the book painters spotlighting particular exegetical traditions. In some ways more importantly, though, the varying conception of initials stages multiple ways to gloss the biblical text, and to involve images in scriptural reading. The figures' silhouette form combines with their disposition to suggest that the images and text are true counterparts, reciprocally revealing ways to read and understand scripture, keeping the role of the book itself as teacher at the fore.

In the populated initials, the First Bible painters often used letter forms to explore the notion of premise, or cause and effect within a biblical story. The relationship between key events and their necessary precursors defines four of the more intricate initial compositions: the **H** at the beginning of Exodus, the **I** at the outset of Ruth, the **C** that begins the prologue to Tobias, and the **V** at the beginning of Isaiah.<sup>11</sup> I will take each of them in turn.

At the beginning of Exodus, the painter used the double-tiered form inherent to the letter **H** to present two encounters that depend on one another: the finding of baby Moses floating in the river, and part of the story of Pharaoh's daughter engaging the child's birth mother as his wet-nurse (Exodus 2:1–9). (Fig. 2) Two points are particularly notable. First, the vignettes do not «read» top to bottom, as the frontispiece scenes opposite do, echoing text; rather, the lower scene is the predicate for the upper.<sup>12</sup> Second, the precise identification of figures in the upper scene is indeterminate. The likeliest reading seems to be Pharaoh's daughter seated, holding one side of the bassinette and gesturing to the baby, with Moses' sister behind her in the attendant's position, and Moses' birth mother holding the other side of his cradle. However, there is also room to read the woman standing opposite Pharaoh's daughter as the sister, since the balanced grips on the cradle seem primarily to indicate close claims on the infant. In that case, the woman behind the throne becomes a more generic attendant/witness—especially since the figures of attendants are mentioned explicitly in the text but here stripped away from the scene by the river to focus the drama on the baby and the princess (v.5).

These issues of ordering and somewhat open iconography both indicate a kind of flexible thinking about text, exegetical in spirit. Even images that hew closely to the «historical» sense of the Exodus events are arranged to amplify a dynamic of cause and effect, rather than a strictly ordered, linear story. This applies to the opening of Exodus as a whole, where the frontispiece depicting Moses receiving the Law and the initial vignettes exist in a causal relationship of their own. The initial grounds the events at Sinai in Moses' full story, just as the Finding vignette grounds the more complex composition concerning Moses' two mothers. But the temporality of the initial figures themselves becomes increasingly complex as one probes the typology of Exodus and the gospels.

The stance of Pharaoh's daughter—in profile, seated with the infant boxed before her and an awe-struck attendant behind her—recalls common elements of Annunciation, Nativity,

<sup>11</sup> Respectively, ff. 28r, 88v, 297v and 130v.

<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the Exodus frontispiece already begins the shift away from literal pictorial reading to iconic gloss. The composition retains the same essential structure as Genesis' (reading sequentially top to bottom) but events are reduced so much that they begin to move towards the concentration on a single central figure that fully emerges for David's portrait as the Psalmist, and culminates in the *Maiestas*.



Fig. 2. First Bible of Charles the Bald, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Ms. lat. 1, ff. 27v–28r. Book of Exodus, Tours (St.-Martin), finished 845, 49.5 x 37.5 cm. Photo: BnF.

and Epiphany scenes composed for a New Testament context.<sup>13</sup> This kind of suggestive visual layering of stories and time accords well with Late Antique poetry and exegesis that derived parallels between the birth of Moses (saved from a king's edict to kill male children) and that of Christ—including ecclesiological meditation on the women in the story and how they embody the Church and the Law.<sup>14</sup> In this, the letter opening the text offers an alternative typology to the Moses / Paul *figura* that Kessler discussed in the frontispiece—one based on parallel reading of the consonant Nativity passages in Exodus and Matthew.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> I elaborate on related iconographic play in Metz in “Iconographies of Progress,” in P. PATTON and C. FERNÁNDEZ (eds), *Iconography Beyond the Crossroads: Image, Meaning, and Method in Medieval Art*, State Park, PA forthcoming. The most active attendant to Mary from the period (I would say) is the maid at Castelseprio, who raises her hands in a gesture closely related to the surprise of the figure in the First Bible. On attendants: R. DESHMAN, “Servants of the Mother of God in Byzantine and Medieval Art,” reprinted in A.S. COHEN (ed.), *Eye and Mind: Collected Essays in Anglo-Saxon and Early Medieval Art by Robert Deshman*, Kalamazoo, MI, 2010, pp. 220–241.

<sup>14</sup> As in the Virgilian cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba (c. 360): see D.J. NODES, *Doctrine and Exegesis in Biblical Latin Poetry*, Leeds, 1993, p. 15. Origen built an ecclesiological allegory from the Mosan Nativity, e.g. See C. HALL, “Moses and the Church Fathers,” in J. BEAL (ed.), *Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance*, Leiden-Boston, 2014, pp. 81–102.

<sup>15</sup> On the parallels of Exodus and Matthew, see J. COHEN, *The Origins and Evolution of the Moses Nativity Story*, Leiden and New York, 1993, pp. 157–171. Cohen argues that the parallels were themselves deliberately constructed by the New Testament writers.



Fig. 3. First Bible of Charles the Bald, Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 1, f. 88v. Book of Ruth. Photo: BnF.

The working of the initial vignettes varies at Ruth. Ruth and Booz converse with one another at the crest of the **I**; Ruth is veiled and carries a book.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 3) Halfway down the shaft of the letter, Naomi occupies a prominent chair, gesturing with her left hand and holding a swaddled infant. The combination of compression and capacious storytelling here is finely calibrated. Naomi's scale and position create a kind of circle through the letter. The Book of Ruth begins with Naomi, following her from Bethlehem to Moab, whence she returns with Ruth. It is also in Ruth's fidelity to Naomi that Carolingian exegetes (building on patristic tradition) located a significant part of her virtue: the halo Ruth bears in the First

<sup>16</sup> I retain the names of the three principal figures as spelled in the Vulgate and the First Bible's *tituli*, instead of the "Ruth, Boaz, and Naomi" familiar from modern translations. How to read the silver triangle between Ruth and Booz is difficult to determine: the form is carefully composed, but somewhat incongruous. It seems conceivable that the metallic ink was added partly to mask an error or a flaw. Since the triangle bridges the two figures and explicitly cuts across Booz's wrist, though, it may indicate the coming marriage bond between the two characters.

Bible is predicated on her worthy dealings with both Noemi and Booz.<sup>17</sup> The conversation between Ruth and Booz is the chief means to the story's end in the baby on Noemi's lap—a prime factor in Ruth's prominence as a book of lively interest to Christian scholars. The son of Ruth and Booz, Obed, whom Noemi nursed, is recorded as the father to Jesse, and therefore grandfather of David (Ruth 4:16–22). That is, the story of Christ is rooted in the story of Ruth. This genealogy creates a link between the Old and New Testaments more literal than exegetical exploration of Ruth, Booz, and Noemi, which cast them as allegories for the Church, Christ, and the Synagogue (often with some variations at different junctures in the story).<sup>18</sup>

Overlaid on the neat circle from Noemi up to Ruth / Booz and back are several vagaries in the representation of the characters relative to the biblical text. Noemi's raised hand indicates speech, corresponding to one of the multiple crucial conversations between Ruth and her mother-in-law—which drive the story forward—or perhaps to Noemi's own singing (Ruth 1:20–21). Similarly, Ruth and Booz have (at least) two conversations before their wedding. Altogether, the spare image of encounter, like Noemi's raised hand, makes clear the centrality of verbal exchange to the outcome of the story, but does not map the linear progress of the text. The inclusion of the baby confirms the endpoint to the narrative, but also conceptually looms over the characters' exchanges at any given juncture, glossing them in retrospect. By virtue of his place in Christ's genealogy, the baby creates an anticipatory link forward to the gospels more concrete than any typology: critical to the achievement of the Christian story, he is critical also to the framework for reading the bible in Tours.

At Tobias, the figural element is still more abbreviated than at Ruth: the initial vignette shows only Tobias the Elder in bed, raising his arm to indicate that he has just been blinded by the falling dung from the swallow's nest (Tobias 2:10–11). (Fig. 4) This juncture is an important one in allegorical interpretations of the Book of Tobias such as Bede's. Much as Hrabanus Maurus read Ruth, Bede read Tobias' whole tale in light of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.<sup>19</sup> When Tobias the Elder is blinded, Bede navigates a shift in how he reads the man's moral signification: the status of the righteous man in the first book is complicated to encompass the blindness of the Jews in rejecting Christ. Such a shift is characteristic of the flexibility in relationships between texts and ideas, or figures and ideas, that defines scriptural interpretation.

Strikingly, Bede chose the moment of Tobias' blinding for a scribal metaphor: "Do not be amazed, O reader, that the good deeds of humans sometimes figuratively signify an evil thing, while at other times evil deeds signify a good. If this were forbidden, then one would always have to write 'God is light' in bright gold and never in black ink. Yet even if you write

<sup>17</sup> On the major Carolingian Ruth commentaries by Claudius of Turin and Hrabanus Maurus, see I.M. DOUGLAS, "The Commentary on the Book of Ruth by Claudius of Turin", *Sacris Erudiri*, 22 (1974-1975), pp. 295-320.

<sup>18</sup> On the shifts, see L. SMITH (ed. and trans.), *Medieval Exegesis in Translation: Commentaries on the Book of Ruth*, Kalamazoo, MI, 1996, esp. pp. xii–xv. It is worth noting that Ruth was not glossed as a precursor to Mary in humility and virtue: Jerome himself grouped her with Tamar, Bathsheba, and Rahab among the "sinful women" in the Matthean genealogy.

<sup>19</sup> BEDE, *In librum beati patris Tobiae*, ed. D. HURST, CSSL 119B, pp. 3-19; trans. W.T. FOLEY, A.G. HOLDER, *Bede: A Biblical Miscellany*, Liverpool, 1999, pp. 53-79.

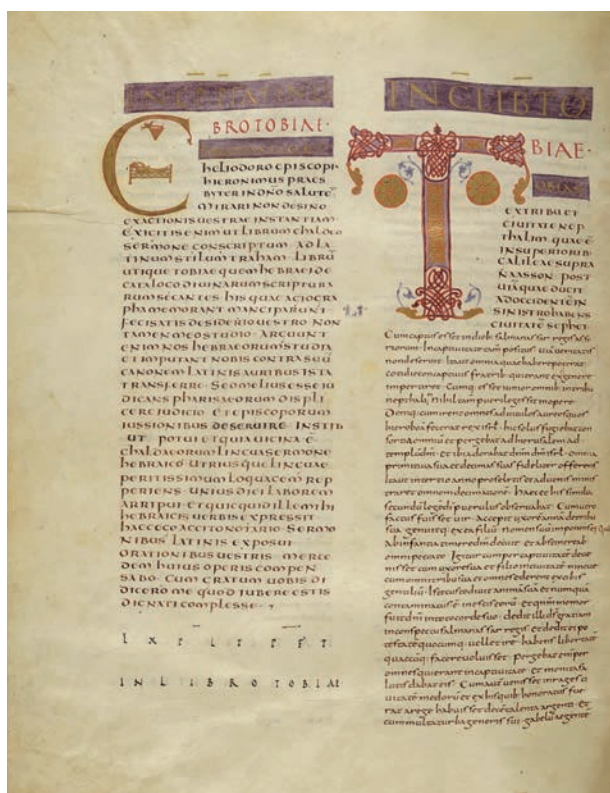


Fig. 4. First Bible of Charles the Bald, Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 1, f. 297v. Book of Tobias. Photo: BnF.

the devil's name in white chalk, it still signifies infernal darkness".<sup>20</sup> Bede's meditation on text, meaning, and outward form is related to the work involved in conceiving historiated initials, and also to the work they perform in a manuscript. Like the possible shifting meanings in a single biblical character or textual formulation, figuration in the context of an initial always poses a question about the relationship of outward appearance to signification. Does the image «match» the text or not? What aspect of the text does the image excavate, if it does «match»? Does the image render judgment on the text, either in its composition or in its materials? Does the image frame an argument about how to understand words? Whatever the answer to these questions might be in any particular scenario, historiation de-stabilizes text, signaling the open possibilities for reading that the patristic exegetical system already advocates. Because the Tobias vignette appears allied to the preface, not scripture itself (as in Ruth), the little image is already classed with the commentary apparatus of the bible.

<sup>20</sup> *Ne mireris lector quod aliquando bona typice malum aliquando bonum mala hominum facta significant; quod si non liceret, numquam nigro atramento sed auro semper lucido scriberetur quia Deus lux est, sed etsi nomen diaboli in calculo scribas candido nihilominus tenebras significat profundas* (2:1). Trans. FOLEY, HOLDER, *Biblical Miscellany*, p. 60.

The blinding of Tobias the Elder is one of the two main impulses for Tobias the Younger to set out with the angel Raphael, who is sent to help the family in the literal flow of the story. Bede muses at Tobias 3:7–8 on Tobias the Younger's identification with Christ's humanity, while the angel signifies his divinity.<sup>21</sup> When the pair sets out in the company of a dog to find a remedy for Tobias the Elder and for the Younger's possessed wife, Sarah, Bede remarks on the work of teaching that Christ's followers performed in the world (calling them *praedicatores* and *doctores*) (Tobias 6:1).<sup>22</sup> In the First Bible, the group of angel, perky dog, and Tobias is included in a silhouette sketch drawn in ink, positioned between the column with the preface and the first column of text proper. The travelers set out, their legs bent in motion and the dog's tail cocked, moving from the uncial apparatus to the minuscule scriptural text just as a studious reader might progress within the book. Rather than aligning the figures with one of the rulings as a way to organize details on the page, the draftsman placed the group between rulings in a way that renders the vegetal flourishes at the base of the **T** a kind of ground line or landscape destination. In this, he hinted that the ornamental components of the page could approximate a physical setting—related to the way the letter itself is reified as a space in the prologue initial, where the bird's nest hangs from the top of the **C**. Such a device—reiterated in other Tours letters that host hanging lamps or crosses—cues the idea that written text may be cast by painting as a theater for reading and thinking.<sup>23</sup>

The two vignettes at Tobias build on one another to sketch the core narrative of the book. As at Ruth, they also ensure that the principal building blocks for an allegorical reading are present: the story has been boiled down to essential figures. Especially in the case of Tobias and Raphael, these are rendered to indicate their participation in a narrative progression. At the same time, as at Ruth, the generalized actions of the figures abstracts them from the particular narrative of the text. By contrast, Tobias the Elder appears in a specific moment of the story. Taken together with his recumbent figure, the traveling group seems to be setting out to solve the problem he has posed. Taken on its own, though, the trio might be captured at various junctures on their journey. The importance of their actions is secured, without specification as to which actions, precisely, should be considered. While reflecting the story of the book, in other words, the composition also leaves room for memory and extrapolation, for a viewer's work with the text at hand.

At Exodus, the scenic elements are quite concrete, and set a premise for what will unfold in the remainder of the book. The composition at Tobias works similarly, with the extra provision of Tobias, Raphael and the dog as figures that exist half in-, half outside the specific flow of events. At Ruth, with knowledge of the story, the triangle of four key figures can encapsulate the entire arc of the book, which depends on the relationships of kinship and virtue among the three adults and culminates in the birth of the child. The literal progression of the book is present in the composition, but schematized enough that each figure is also available for consideration on its own. These three modulated approaches to historiated initials, that is, demonstrate that the painters of the First Bible did not adopt a single compositional

<sup>21</sup> See FOLEY, HOLDER, *Biblical Miscellany*, p. 61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., f. 265v in the First Bible. The Moutier-Grandval Bible painters were particularly fond of the device: e.g., ff. 2r, 308r, 329v.

premise whereby images could be used to reflect on the multifaceted nature of reading. They varied the model, keeping the relationship among figures, text, and story malleable.

The same principle pertains at Isaiah, but with a telling difference: a book of prophecy does not offer the same obvious possibilities for scenic illustration as do the discursive, event-driven texts of Exodus, Ruth, and Tobias. To engage the genre of prophecy, Tours painters might, in theory, have adopted an approach similar to the artists of the Stuttgart or Utrecht Psalters, who visualized the imagery of the psalms using a network of «word-illustration» and cross-reference both to exegesis and to liturgical occasion. Instead, the painter looked ahead in Isaiah to Book 6:1–6, passing over the transcribed prophecies at the beginning of the book to create a two-part image of one of the few recounted events in the text. Like the instances just described, the two parts of this image are causally bound to one another.

The form of the **V** is used to distinguish between the visionary and what he saw. (Fig. 5) Within the letter appear a bust of Christ flanked by two seraphim, and a flaming altar. In the outer margin, the prophet receives a coal to his lips from one of the seraphs, who emerges from behind the side of the letter with a pair of tongs. The details account for all the elements in the beginning of Book 6, with some modifications that remove the composition from precise word illustration, allowing for some pictorial logic and flexibility. Isaiah reports that he saw the Lord enthroned, «high and elevated, and his train filled the temple» (6:1).<sup>24</sup> The painter prioritized the elevation of the Lord over the image of the throne and the temple. The text does not specify that the altar was flaming, but it must have been in order for the house to fill with smoke (6:4) and for the seraph to take a coal from the altar (*de altari*) with the tongs (6:6). In this way, the painter set up the premises needed for the depicted event to occur: the encounter of the prophet and seraph with the coal.

That encounter contains a potent ambiguity. Isaiah holds his left hand as if speaking, and the square coal does not quite touch his mouth.<sup>25</sup> In the text, Isaiah speaks both before and after the angel brings the coal: first to bemoan that his lips are unclean (6:5) and then to answer the Lord's call to testify (6:8). Since it is not clear whether the seraph approaches or recedes with the coal, the composition accommodates not one moment but two. This suspended animation—more dramatic than the conversation of Ruth and Booz—renders the sense of event more central to the page than the sequential steps of a narrative *per se*.

The seraph's position is in keeping also with another freighted ambiguity in the composition: the eyes in the seraphim's wings. Not mentioned in Isaiah's text, the eyed wings are proper to two other visions: the six-winged creatures of *Revelation* 4:8, who gather around the Lord's throne and also sing, *Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus*; and the cherubs of Ezekiel 10:12. The painter may, at least in part, have fallen back on a known paradigm for representing the heavenly host: the cherubim of the roughly contemporary Drogo Sacramentary and Metz Sacramentary both bear eyes in their wings.<sup>26</sup> However, especially in concert with the

<sup>24</sup> *Sedentem super solium excelsum et elevatum; et ea quae sub ipso erant replebant templum.*

<sup>25</sup> If not a graphic expediency, the square form might nod to the tablet Isaiah himself will be commanded to write on in Isaiah 8:1.

<sup>26</sup> The Drogo Sacramentary is Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 9428, see f. 15r; the Metz Sacramentary is Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 1141, see ff. 5r and 6r.



Fig. 5. First Bible of Charles the Bald, Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 1, f. 130v. Book of Isaiah. Photo: BnF

rendition of the *Sanctus* in Isaiah (distinct from the Mass chant from *Revelation* after the thrice-holy beginning), the consonance of the eyes with visions of God in other books of the Bible amplifies the program's networking among various texts. Moreover, the eyes are inevitably a detail that bring the theme of vision to the fore. Together with the choice at Tobias to amplify the episode of the Elder's blinding, the eyed seraphim stand with Isaiah himself as a reminder that seeing is a mode of knowing in the Bible—a mode that painting introduces to the First Bible in general, and that the painter particularly elaborated at Isaiah in his alignment of the prophet's vision and the viewer's own sight of the page.<sup>27</sup>

The notion of causal premise suggested earlier activates at Isaiah in the choice of the coal episode for visualization. The purification of Isaiah's mouth is the basis on which he goes forward as the messenger of the Lord—especially to deliver the prophecy of virgin birth that

<sup>27</sup> This reminder comes well in advance of the *Revelation* frontispiece, which, as Kessler showed, is based on a metaphor of seeing for the transition between the Old Testament and the New. See KESSLER, "Facies bibliothecae revelata", in which he comments also on the Christian prerogative of figuration.

recurs in typological Christology (7:14). The virgin birth is a useful starting place to consider the lurking question of selection across the corpus of initials: after all, the historiated initials of the First Bible are not many. In addition to the four just discussed, a bust roundel depicting God as the Word appears at the beginning of Genesis (f. 111r).<sup>28</sup> A standing figure with red hair, a halo, and a scroll introduces Hosea (f. 192v). Moses appears again as an adult at the beginning to Numbers, there haloed and tonsured (f. 49r). The remaining elaborate figural initials occur at the Book of Judith (ff. 300v–301r).<sup>29</sup> An elaborately veiled Judith occupies the initial for the prologue to the book. At the beginning of the text proper, in the initial floats a male head perhaps to be identified as Holofernes, due to the suggestion of a military-style cloak fastened at the shoulder (and since his lack of headgear makes Nebuchadnezzar unlikely). In the margin beside it appears a silhouette figure, whose hat identifies him as eastern, and whose *titulus* identifies him as Arfaxat (the Median king at war with Nebuchadnezzar in Judith 1:1). Flanking the title of the book in the upper margin stand two veiled women holding spindles.

These figures do not hold together with the same organization described in the instances above: principal characters are visualized, but nothing happens (unless, in this context, the male head appearing alone in the main initial makes macabre foreshadowing out of what is otherwise a decorative trope scattered through the bible, as at Samuel or the prologue to Job, where the isolated heads engender a sense of witness [ff. 101v and 205v]). The attention to the title by women carrying familiar attributes not mentioned in the story might hint at an alternative use of illumination to direct attention. The females could be the rich widow Judith's servants, extrapolated from the text, but they could also refer to the women attending on Louis the Pious' second wife, Judith, mother of Charles the Bald.<sup>30</sup>

Such a suggestion is inconclusive, but it prompts recognition of the way the books selected for more intensive initialing all betray a keen interest in genealogy. This emphasis dovetails with two significant genealogies in particular: Christ's and the Franks', insofar as the Franks identified themselves as the new Israel.<sup>31</sup> The David–Christ–Charles rhyme described by Kessler for the full-page paintings is a primary axis here; also relevant is the upper margin at the beginning of Maccabees, which hosts a hand backed by a cross, honored by two angels (f. 317r). The composition references the divine favor for the Maccabees' warfare—a topic dear to the Franks and known as a subject of interest in later Carolingian book illumination from the surviving *Maccabees* in Leiden.<sup>32</sup> The attention to Moses' birth relates to the New

<sup>28</sup> On this figure: C. VOYER, *Orner la parole de Dieu, le livre d'Évangiles et son décor (800–1030)*. Paris, Arsenal, ms. 592, Paris, 2018, pp. 111 and 122.

<sup>29</sup> The manuscript contains also various heads, and a few initials of note displaying animals or objects: e.g., a crown and salving instruments at the Book of Kings (f. 120v) and further liturgical implements at ff. 265r–v, the Paralipomenon; pollinating birds at Ezekiel (f. 166v); a gathering of animals and a chalice at Job (f. 206v); a harp at the Psalter preface (f. 216r); and the New Testament figures mentioned in note 10.

<sup>30</sup> On the contemporaneity of the First Bible, see M. PIPPAL, "Distanzierung und Aktualisierung in der Vivianbibel. Zur Struktur der touronischen Miniaturen in den 40er Jahren des 9. Jahrhunderts", *Aachener Kunstblätter*, 60 (1994), pp. 61–78.

<sup>31</sup> G. HEYDEMANN, "The People of God and the Law: Biblical Models in Carolingian Legislation", *Speculum*, 95/1 (2020), pp. 89–131.

<sup>32</sup> The Leiden Maccabees is Universiteitsbibliotheek, Cod. Per. F.17. On Carolingian interest in the Maccabees, see M. DE JONG, "The Empire as *ecclesia*: Hrabanus Maurus and Biblical *historia* for Rulers", in *The Uses of the Past*

Israel theme as well as to typology. The reappearance of a standing adult Moses, haloed and tonsured, at the beginning to Numbers (f. 49r) then suggests how much his figure was absorbed into a contemporary picture of religious leadership, providing another visual element that pulls forward from the biblical past to the political present. In a related vein, the rendition of Isaiah's vision out of all the prophets suggests a coordination of biblical and contemporary religious practice. Isaiah's vision takes place in the Temple, the angels sing the thrice-holy praise of overlap between heavenly and earthly liturgy *par excellence*, and the altar at the center of the initial, imagined on a jeweled pattern, creates consonance between the imagined Temple and medieval liturgical space.<sup>33</sup>

This kind of folding of time was evident already in the Genesis initial, where God as the Logos carries a hefty codex, open to show its lines of text (f. 11r), and in the book Ruth carries. These details invite discussion about self-aware book-making related to that commonly surrounding evangelist portraits. The book opens with a major image of the text's own genesis in the work of Jerome (f. 3v).<sup>34</sup> The small figure of a tonsured scholar sitting in the first initial to the general prefaces, which presumably represents either Jerome or his correspondent (f. 4v), is part of the same story.<sup>35</sup> The divine and human authors of the Latin bible present it as a concrete, material work, self-referential to the volume at hand. The first frontispiece is devoted to Jerome's work as a scholar and translator, and articulates the theme of material books as vehicles for scripture. The small scholar integral to the letter **F** allies such involvement with Christian books with the textual fabric of a Tours bible. The open hand of God in the roundel above the scholar indicates the ultimate authority with which first the texts constituting the bible—including the prefaces—and then the present copy were associated.

The second figural initial in the First Bible of Charles the Bald crystallizes the evocation of blended scriptural and actual time. (Fig. 6) The initial introduces Jerome's preface to his translation of the Pentateuch, in which he defends his choice to translate directly from Hebrew in part by pointing out how often the apostles and evangelists quote directly from the Hebrew.<sup>36</sup> His theme is thus partly the interpenetration of scriptural text, and the movement from the Old Testament to the New. The painter picked up these themes in the provision of a chapter list for Genesis framed beneath arches with hanging crowns and vessels (ff. 9r–v), just as the gospel canons and the epistles concordance will be, mirroring the starker two-part

---

*in the Early Middle Ages*, Y. HEN, M. INNES (eds.), Cambridge, 2000, pp. 191–226. Also worth citing in this context is the Murbach manuscript dated to c. 830, now held in Geneva, which contains Hrabanus Maurus' commentaries on the books of Judith, Esther, and the Maccabees. The frontispiece presents a bust portrait of Queen Judith blessed by the hand of God, embedded in one of Hrabanus' figural poems. The queen's crown houses the *IUD* of *iudex*. Geneva, Bibliothèque de Genève, Ms. lat. 22, f. 3v.

<sup>33</sup> On the alliance of the liturgy and the visionary, see É. PALAZZO, "Visions and Liturgical Experience in the Early Middle Ages", in C. HOURIHANE (ed.), *Looking Beyond: Dreams, Visions, and Insights in Medieval Art and History*, University Park, PA, pp. 15–29.

<sup>34</sup> H.L. KESSLER, "Jerome and Vergil in Carolingian Frontispieces and the Uses of Translation", in CAILLET, LAFFITTE, *Les manuscrits carolingiens*, pp. 121–140.

<sup>35</sup> The preface text is one of Jerome's letters to Paulinus (edited as Epistle 53). See D. DE BRUYNE, *Préfaces de la Bible latine*, Namur, 1920, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> For the text: DE BRUYNE, *Préfaces*, pp. 7–8; trans. S. REBENICH, *Jerome*, London, 2002, pp. 101–104.



Fig. 6. First Bible of Charles the Bald, Paris, BnF, Ms. lat. 1, f. 8r. General prefaces. Photo: BnF.

structure of the Bamberg Bible. The initial **D** (*Desiderii mei*) hosts the Zodiac around the rim, with the chariots of Sun and Moon in the center. The Sun has pulled out Pisces: biting each end of a cloth that may reflect the Aratean description of the star at the center of Pisces as the «knot of the heavens,» the two fish seem to swim toward one another, pulling the Sun along.<sup>37</sup> The notion of historiation is thus coupled with two essential themes from the outset of the First Bible: first with the Christian scholarly tradition of writing and reading, and then with the explicit evocation of time. Time, moreover, is depicted here in motion. The movements and cycles of the stars are allied with the idea of Christian reading—reading that depends on a layering of history from the Old Testament through the New, extending up to include the self-fashioning of Carolingian society.

<sup>37</sup> See G. DE CALLATAÏ, “The Knot of the Heavens”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 59 (1996), pp. 1-13. On the joined mouths of Pisces: E.M. Ramírez-Weaver, *A Saving Science: Capturing the Heavens in Carolingian Manuscripts*, State Park PA, 2017, esp. 102–103. The logic of pulling Pisces out of the round of constellations requires further investigation.

In treating the First Bible's poetry and frontispiece paintings together, Kessler and Paul Dutton emphasized the essential point that by every measure—visual and verbal—the project was dedicated to an elucidation of the harmony of scripture as a whole, and the bible's overarching definition as a Christian book. In the words of the first long poem: «Here is the fount, here the powerful teaching, here the overflowing streams / Of the holy church [that are] whiter than snow.»<sup>38</sup> As noted earlier, the gospel section of the First Bible bears no historiated initials, only a close alliance of the evangelists' symbols with the letters of the manuscript and the marginal figure of Jerome teaching at the Prefaces. In the sense of *pictura qua figura*, though, all the most elaborate initials are gospel scenes. Generally, one must read typologically or allegorically to attain the link between Moses' nativity and Jesus', or Tobias the Younger and God Incarnate, but at Ruth one can read literally: Ruth, Booz, and Obed embody part of the Matthean genealogy. A fusion between literal and typological reading is proper to Old Testament prophecy in a Christian sphere: the prophecy of virgin birth represents both the words of Isaiah's text and the source for numerous citations to the prefigured Incarnation. In the First Bible, the frontispieces stage the most prominent argument about the shape and interconnected resonance of scripture through time—capped, as Kessler showed, by the *Revelation* image—but the initials knit this argument into the matter of the text itself.

The role of figural initials in the First Bible is literally to be cross-referential *figurae* that combine the visual and the textual alongside layers of scriptural time. They draw attention to material text as the basis of Christian reading, and signal how multifaceted that reading can be. In this, the initials tighten the web binding the Old Testament to the New, making a full bible into a unified book that flows toward the gospels. The initials complement the definition of a full bible as a book of promise and fulfillment by relying on active processes of reading and seeing. In this, they implicate the written book itself in all the salutary work the poems describe as rooted in the scriptures, drawing attention to its role as immanent means and mediator of access.

The First Bible's poems are rife with injunctions to Charles about how to engage the book. The first time the command to “see” appears at the beginning of a line refers to the transition from the Old to the New Testament: “Behold, you have now read the Old Testament prepared for you, / But the New one that rightly follows [it] reveals things fit to be read.”<sup>39</sup> On the verso of this poem of transition appears the image of the *Maiestas domini*. Although part of a process of growth and adaptation in the manuscript, as Dutton and Kessler demonstrated, this spatial solution became an elegant pictorial revelation crowning the ideas of the poem.<sup>40</sup> The *schema* of the *Maiestas* signifies an ordering of the cosmos, and the First Bible's inclusion of prophets along with the evangelists leaves no doubt as to Christ's fulfillment of textual typologies. The non-narrative form of the *Maiestas* frees it to reveal trans-temporal structures above all. But the verbal invocation at this juncture that couples seeing and understanding in

<sup>38</sup> Poem 1, lines 61–62. *Hic fons, hic doctrina potens, hic flumina opima / Ecclesiae sanctae candidiora nive*. ed. and trans. DUTTON, KESSLER, *Poetry and Paintings*, pp. 106–107.

<sup>39</sup> *En iam lecta tibi series transacta vetusta, / Sed nova rite sequens ista legenda patet*. Poem VI (f. 329r), ed. and trans. DUTTON, KESSLER, *Poetry and Paintings*, pp. 114–115.

<sup>40</sup> DUTTON, KESSLER, *Poetry and Paintings*, pp. 50–51.

a Christian sense also pertains quite literally to the role the visual side of the manuscript has played all along. The pictures, along with other integral apparatus like the prefaces and poems, have worked to make the whole bible a Christian text. Equally importantly, they have made the whole bible both a Christian and a Carolingian *book*.

The introductory poem and the dedication image explicitly frame the entire pandect as a work of Tours, made for Charles, crafted in a specific codex form. As discussed with particular reference to the role of initial painting, that form gives great weight to visuality as a partner to text—glossing not only what the text might say, but what it represents *as* text. The first poem, written to define verbally the project of the pandect also expressed in its visual compositions, again encapsulates the point: the book was made for self-conscious reflection on its own medium, genre, and purpose. “Being present here, it [this *biblioteca*] sings the past, showing the present” (*Et praesens transacta canit praesentia monstrans*).<sup>41</sup> The parallel of *praesens* and *monstrans* is worth attending to: the definition of the monumental manuscript is its capacity to show. What it shows is, not least, its own wrought presence.

---

<sup>41</sup> Poem 1, line 11; ed. and trans. DUTON, KESSLER, *Poetry and Paintings*, pp. 104-105, modified translation by author.

