

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST

My interest in early bible illustration was aroused in the course of an attempt to find out the meaning of the woodcuts in an old bible in Friends' House Library. The bible in question is dated November 1541. It belongs to the sixth edition of the Great Bible⁴⁰ of Henry VIII, of which there were seven editions between April 1539 and December 1541. In it are seventy-six woodcuts apparently intended to illustrate the text. Some are set in their context and their interpretation is fairly straightforward. In some, however, the relation to the context is not at all clear. Others have no context, but occur only on the intermediate title-pages.

The Great Bible is in five parts, usually bound in one volume. Parts I, II and III constitute the Old Testament as we know it today, Part IV is the Apocrypha, and Part V the New Testament. The title-page of the whole book, used also for Part V, shews Henry VIII on his throne handing out the Word of God to the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, by whom it is passed on to the common people. The title-pages of Parts II, III and IV consist each of sixteen pictorial woodcuts grouped round the printed title: these might be presumed to refer to the contents of the part in question, but closer examination shewed that this was not always the case.

In Part I, Genesis to Deuteronomy, there are twenty-four woodcuts, all in context, which present little difficulty in identification, though they raise some curious questions of another kind: why, for instance, should Moses be represented with horns, or why in the picture of Isaac blessing Jacob should there be no indication of the goatskin gloves?

For Part II, Joshua to Job, there are twenty-five pictures, all in context: a selection of sixteen is also made for the title-page.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST

Again identification was easy, though the placing of some of the pictures did not seem quite right, and the selection of subjects chosen for illustration struck me as odd. A picture inserted in 2 Samuel viii shewed chariot horses with their feet cut off, a barbarous incident of no obvious importance. A picture for 2 Kings xviii shewed Hezekiah burning up the altars of false gods; but a book was being read to the king, so that the circumstances more nearly fitted the case of Josiah in 2 Kings xxii. There were other anomalies like these.

When I came to Part III, Psalms to Malachi, I found no pictures in the text, and had to start guessing the meaning of the sixteen in the title-page. I could place only seven with confidence, and even then there were some curious features. A picture of the Messiah bearing a cross and seated beside the Almighty might be meant to illustrate Psalm cx, 'The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand', except that the Messiah is on the left hand, not on the right. Another woodcut remotely suggested the Vision of Ezekiel (Ezek. i), but it had a Latin inscription that made no sense.

Part IV also had no woodcuts in the text. Some of those on the title-page did not seem to fit the Apocrypha: three might belong to Ezekiel, one shewed David and Goliath, while several might be applicable to apocryphal stories as well as to incidents in the Old Testament proper. Lastly, in Part V, the New Testament, there was only one woodcut, depicting an elderly writer with a lion or large cat. Mark is often shewn with a lion, but this picture came at the beginning of Matthew.

These instances may indicate the kind of puzzle one was challenged to solve. There were at least fourteen woodcuts about whose identification I was left in doubt. Among the others were certain misplacements, and evidently there was some inferior workmanship in rendering inscriptions. Why in an English bible were the inscriptions in Latin, and why were the scenes for illustration so arbitrarily chosen and so unevenly distributed over the whole book?

The last question was that to which a probable answer was most readily forthcoming. The story of the printing of the Great

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST

Bible is well known, though it was new to me at the time. What had a bearing on the choice and arrangement of the pictures was that the printing was begun in Paris, interrupted there by the action of the Inquisition, and eventually completed, without quite the same facilities, in London. This might account for the layout of Parts I and II being notably different from that of Parts III, IV and V.

Furthermore, the whole story directs attention to the possibility of the woodcuts of the English Bible being of French origin. It therefore seemed to me to be worth while to look at the contemporary French bibles in Cambridge University Library. As I expected, I found the French illustrations very like the English; but they were equally puzzling. The workmanship was certainly crude, but many of the pictures were of a style that suggested a background of better inspiration. They might be degenerate imitations of the work of a really good artist.

Now the great title-page showing Henry VIII was better drawn than the pictorial woodcuts, and I came upon hints in Hastings' Bible Dictionary and elsewhere that it might be the work of Hans Holbein the younger, who was court painter to Henry VIII at the time the Great Bible was brought out. I started reading about Holbein and to my great joy I found in Cambridge University Library a small octavo volume^{too} of Old Testament woodcuts by Holbein printed and published by Trechsel of Lyons in 1538. There were ninety-four woodcuts altogether. The subjects included most of those treated in the seventy-six in the Great Bible, and the treatment was similar, though, of course, Holbein's work was immeasurably finer. There was no doubt, however, that they belonged to the same series. The difficulty of identification too was now to a large extent solved, for Holbein attached a Latin title to every picture and gave the biblical reference for the subject of it. As a result of this discovery only two of the Great Bible woodcuts remained unlabelled in my mind.

The solution of one problem usually sets another. Were the Great Bible woodcuts degenerate copies of Holbein or was Holbein the improver of a set of woodcuts forming a traditional series? The little Holbein book was in Latin: where there were

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST

inscriptions in the Great Bible woodcuts, these were in Latin. Accordingly I started looking through old editions of Latin bibles in the University Library. I came on one⁴⁰ with woodcuts of the now familiar series, and the date was 1511, at which time Holbein would have been only fourteen years of age. So it seemed unlikely that the series originated with him.

The same bible gave a further clue. At the head of Genesis was a set of six woodcuts of the Six Days of Creation, but the separate days were indicated not in Latin, but in Italian—*DI PRIMO, DI SECONDO, DI TERZO*, etc. The figure must have been transferred from an Italian bible, and a search among the early Italian bibles soon brought to light one published at Venice by Lucantonio di Giunta in 1490. This bible,³⁸ by the same publisher as the Vulgate of 1511, has the same set of pictures rather more clearly printed, probably by an earlier use of the same blocks.

I had now got back to a date seven years before Holbein was born. That disposed of one surmise regarding the origin of the series of woodcuts. It was at this stage that I realised that there were bibles printed in most of the European languages long before we had printed any bible in English, and that many of them were more profusely illustrated with woodcuts than ours, and a good deal more intelligently too. As printing only started in Europe in about 1455, there could not be so very many earlier ones to be examined, so, with the help of the British Museum catalogue, I began a systematic search for early printed bibles with woodcuts. The most thrilling find was that of the Low German bible¹⁶ printed by Quentel of Cologne, variously dated from 1478 to 1480. It has 123 woodcuts covering most of the incidents illustrated in the English Great Bible. They are characteristic in style and beautifully drawn. On one picture of Joseph is a clear artist's signature, *CLEVE*. There was a whole family of artists of this name in the Netherlands in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: so we were apparently coming near to the origin of the whole picture series. A High German bible¹⁸ of Nürnberg of about the same date was similarly illustrated but less profusely. Some earlier vernacular bibles with woodcuts were printed at Augsburg and Nürnberg. In them the pictures were of a different type.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST

Not all the regularly recurring pictures, however, were traceable to the bibles of Augsburg and Cologne. An important group, diagrammatic in character and frequently bearing Latin inscriptions, some erroneously copied, appeared for the first time in the Italian bible of 1490. In it the mistakes were few, but not altogether absent. The indications were that the diagrams were copied into this bible from some other source. I found this eventually among the heavy tomes of the early printed Vulgates containing the elaborate commentaries associated with the name of Nicolas de Lyra surrounding the text (the *Glossa ordinaria* with Lyra's *Postillae*). These were evidently learned works, in which one hardly expected to find illustrations; but the diagrams were there, all correctly set out in their context, and in the commentary were complete explanations of the mysterious lettering in the Vision of Ezekiel and some others. The first printed edition²³ of this work, with diagrams, was by Koberger of Nürnberg, dated 1481.

In this pursuit through early printed bibles I was surprised to find so little literature upon the subject. Biblical scholars and historians have devoted infinite pains to a close scrutiny of the text of the various translations, but few have displayed the slightest interest in the pictures, which turned out to be an important feature of those bibles printed in unlearned tongues, and making their appeal to the less learned readers whose comprehension would be helped by the illustrations. I was encouraged to think it might be useful to put my findings on record so as to enable others more competent to follow up the trail. I realised, of course, that alongside the bibles I had been studying there were others, Luther's bibles for instance, the illustrations for which had had a similar history, and following up some of these I came at last on a substantial body of literature in German, and to a lesser extent in French. In *Bilderschmuck der Frühdrucke*, a monumental work in twenty-three volumes by the late Albert Schramm, I found reproductions of the illustrations in all German books printed before 1500, a large number of them biblical. There also I got references to works upon the bibles of Cologne, Lübeck and Wittenberg, while a friendly librarian in Zürich referred me to recent work on Froschauer, the great printer of that city.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some
Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION: THE QUEST

With the help obtained from these and other sources I have found it possible to set out the history of early bible illustration in approximately chronological order. Time is a one-way street in which it is simpler to move with the traffic than against it. I begin the story therefore with the earliest printing and allow it to lead up to the Great Bible of Henry VIII—beyond which point, for reasons which will be apparent when we get there, I do not propose to go. The tale must end somewhere, and the place where I started turns out to be a fitting place at which to stop.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 2

THE EARLIEST PRINTED PICTURES

BIBLIA PAUPERUM

The printing of pictures from wooden blocks carved in relief is older than the printing of books from movable type. The earliest known prints of European origin are conventionally dated about 1415, and as bookbinding was by that time a well-established art, it was an easy and natural development to make whole books of prints. In the course of the fifteenth century many such 'block-books' were in circulation. Several of a religious nature are well known, such as *Ars moriendi* (the Art of Dying), *Speculum humanae salvationis* (the Mirror of Man's Salvation) and *Biblia Pauperum* (the Poor Man's Bible). Only the last of these is entirely biblical in content and seems to have affected the illustration of early printed bibles to an appreciable extent: a few of the pictures in it are the recognisable prototypes of those in later works.

Some scholars hold that the name in full was *Biblia Pauperum Praedicatorum* or Poor Preachers' Bible, the intention being not so much to present the bible stories to the illiterate as to give the poor preacher ideas for his sermons. The poor preacher would probably be able to read Latin, or else his own language. His congregation might not be able to read at all; but he could show them the pictures, and base his teaching on them, giving a point-to-point exposition, literal, moral and allegorical, from the pictorial illustrations.

The *Biblia Pauperum* belonged to an age of transition, and took various forms. Commonly there were 34 pages and sometimes 40. These told the story of the New Testament from the Annunciation to the Day of Pentecost, with the addition usually of the Crowning of the Virgin Mary. On each page there are three pictures arranged in panels. The centre panel has the New Testament picture and on either side is a picture of an Old

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE EARLIEST PRINTED PICTURES

Testament analogue. For instance (Fig. 1) the picture of the Last Supper is flanked on one side by Melchizedek presenting Abraham with bread and wine, and on the other side by Moses and Aaron supervising the collection of Manna, the 'Bread of Heaven'.

The lower half of the page is occupied by written explanations of the Old Testament scenes (there were editions in Latin and in German). No such explanation is offered of the New Testament scene, but in each corner is a relevant text along with a small portrait of its reputed author—such as David, Solomon, or one of the prophets. The letterpress in the earliest editions is not printed from movable types as it would be in a modern book; writing and picture are all part of the same block.

In manuscript form examples are known* dating from the fourteenth century. Of block-books there is first a very fine Latin edition¹ of Dutch origin and of date round about 1460. The second Latin edition² is also thought to be of Dutch origin and dated about 1470. In 1471 came the German edition³ of Hans Hürning of Nördlingen in which the drawings are by Friedrich Walther. In 1475 there was a further German edition⁴ by Hans Sporer printed either at Nürnberg or Erfurt: there is some uncertainty as to its place of origin. Meanwhile an enterprising German printer, Albert Pfister of Bamberg, had printed three editions⁵—German 1462, Latin 1463, and German again 1464—in which he made use of the invention of movable type. Pfister made† the various sections of the block detachable from one another, so that his was in effect the ordinary technique in which pictures are used to illustrate printed matter, except that it would be more in keeping with the object of the work to think of it as the use of print to explain the pictures.

Long after printing in the ordinary medium was well established, two other editions of the *Biblia Pauperum* using Pfister's method were produced, one⁶ in French by Antoine Vérard of Paris about 1500, and one⁷ in Italian by Vavassore of Venice between 1515 and 1520.

* Laib und Schwarz, '*Biblia Pauperum*', p. 6.

† Schramm, *Bilderschmuck der Frühdrucke*, i, p. 1; Laib und Schwarz, *op. cit.* p. 8.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

EARLY BIBLES IN HIGH GERMAN

One of the first books printed in Europe, if not the first printed from movable types, was a Vulgate⁸ or Latin bible attributed to Gutenberg of Mainz in 1455 or 1456.

The first bible printed in a modern European language was one⁹ in High German by Mentelin of Strassburg in 1466. The art of printing was now being rapidly developed, starting in Germany, moving to Italy and thence by trade-routes to France and further afield. In many of the principal cities, such as Augsburg, Nürnberg, Cologne, Venice, Paris, Lübeck, Lyons, vernacular bibles or abridgements of the Bible were printed before the end of the fifteenth century. 'Clerks' and scholars then read Latin, but the persons who could read their own language must have been few. Thus, from an early stage, pictures became a helpful adjunct of a bible, whether intended for the common people or for the humbler ranks of the clergy. Of the seventeen German bibles before Luther, fifteen were illustrated.

About 1475 (the exact date is uncertain) Günther Zainer of Augsburg published a bible¹⁰ in which the large initial letter at the beginning of each book was filled with an appropriate illustration. Genesis, for instance (Fig. 2), has a picture of the Creation showing Adam and Eve with tree and serpent in a walled Garden of Eden and, curiously enough, a city in the distance outside. The Book of Job (Fig. 3) begins with a letter E in which the middle bar makes a convenient division between Heaven and Earth. Satan appears (horns, cloven hoof and all) before God in Heaven, while Job lies below in affliction, conversing, not altogether agreeably, with his wife (the reference is obviously to Job ii. 10: 'Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh'). Similarly Solomon is seen writing the Book of Proverbs and Jeremiah is depicted weeping at the gate of the city while his fellow-countrymen are being marched into captivity.

These earliest illustrations in printed bibles are in the style, not of the instructive *Biblia Pauperum*, but of the historiated initials of the illuminated manuscripts lovingly decorated by the medieval scribes. Instruction is probably not their primary purpose; but

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10002-1 - Early Bible Illustrations: A Short Study Based on Some Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Century Printed Texts

James Strachan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE EARLIEST PRINTED PICTURES

the way in which instruction is introduced into the decoration surely indicates that it is at least a secondary one.

In 1477 Zainer published a second edition¹¹ of this bible, using the same woodcuts and adding one more. Meanwhile, just before this, Sensenschmidt and Frisner of Nürnberg had brought out a German bible¹² with decorated initial letters which are evidently imitated from Zainer's by a less skilful hand. This is one of the earliest instances of the practice of borrowing ideas for sets of illustrations, a practice that became prevalent in the bible production of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Very shortly after Zainer's first illustrated German bible came another from Augsburg printed by Jodocus Pflanzmann, notary and procurator of the see of Augsburg, who was engaged* in printing for about six years only, 1475-81. The exact date of Pflanzmann's bible¹³ is, like some of the others, not quite certain: but the probable date is the latter part of 1475. In it a pictorial woodcut figures at the head of many books of the Bible, not in a decorative initial letter, but as a picture, so to speak, in its own right. In the narrative books, topical scenes are depicted, such as the Crossing of the Red Sea (Fig. 4) or the Judgment of Solomon. In the prophetic books a single conventional prophet does duty over and over again; there are similar conventions for the writers of the epistles and even for three of the four evangelists. There are only twenty-one woodcuts all told. At the head of the Gospel of Matthew is a woodcut representing not Matthew but the Church of the New Testament (Fig. 5). This is a glorified figure riding a four-footed creature with the four heads of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle, first described by Ezekiel and later appearing in the Book of Revelation.

The first woodcut, at the head of Genesis, is the Creation, carried out in the same style as Zainer's initial letter for the same theme. Pflanzmann's woodcuts generally have little artistic merit and are chiefly of interest as the first bible illustrations of this particular kind. Two years later, in 1477, Anton Sorg of Augsburg published another German bible¹⁴ in which he took over seventeen of Pflanzmann's pictures and added twenty-five of his

* Schramm, *Die illustrierten Bibeln der deutschen Inkunabeldrucker*, p. 7.