“Skillfully tracing the intertext between artistic illuminations and biblical passages, Jonathan Homrighausen’s sensitive exegeses afford exquisite depth and dimension to three familiar biblical traditions as well as invite readers to experience for themselves The Saint John’s Bible. Tracing the motif of trees across Jesus Family Tree in Matthew’s Gospel, the Trees of Knowledge and Life in Women’s Biblical Stories, and the centrality of Trees in the Creation Traditions, Homrighausen ignites our imagination with new possibilities not only for fresh interpretations of these texts but also for how they urgently summon us to the promotion of justice.”

—Gina Hens-Piazza
Professor of Biblical Studies, Joseph C. Alemany Endowed Chair
Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

“Jonathan Homrighausen has done what the creators of The Saint John’s Bible hoped for most. He has explored its ‘beautiful persuasion’ to reveal the way its beauty speaks across volumes and across audiences as it proclaims the Good News. Illuminating Justice is truly a joy to read. While going deep into key images in The Saint John’s Bible, Homrighausen shows how this Bible, while using ancient tools and traditional materials, fits into a new world of theological thought. It is one that approaches the relationship between Catholics and Jews, the role of women, and creation care, in fresh and empowering ways. This volume rings with insight and draws our attention to the work of numerous contemporary theologians and artists. Reading it, one will discover things not just about art, but also about living out one’s faith in the 21st century.”

—Susan Sink
Author of The Art of The Saint John’s Bible: The Complete Reader’s Guide

“‘Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,’ a phrase coined in the nineteenth century by Margaret Wolfe Hungerford, corresponds with what today’s biblical interpreters refer to as ‘the world in front of the text.’ In other words, there is a subjective quality to all interpretation. Jonathan Homrighausen here provides us with a stunning example of such interpretation. Reading the exquisite illuminations found in The Saint John’s Bible, he lifts up three ethical-sacramental themes: respect for Jewish sensitivities; attention to feminist concerns; and appreciation for natural creation. In this remarkable book, he thus shows us that art is not only an expression of beauty, but of justice as well.”

—Dianne Bergant, CSA
Professor Emerita of Old Testament Studies
Catholic Theological Union
“In this gem of a book, Jonathan Homrighausen not only takes us on a lavishly illustrated tour of *The Saint John's Bible*—an artistic achievement unparalleled since the Middle Ages—but he reveals the ethical power of its images: for interreligious dialogue, women's rights, and ecology. Jonathan Homrighausen is a creative emerging voice in imaginative theology and his adventurous book deserves a readership across disciplinary boundaries.”

—J. David Pleins
Santa Clara University

“This volume is itself an introduction to visual art as an essential element of biblical interpretation. Homrighausen’s own rich ‘sacramental imagination’ is always in view, never intrusive, as he follows images across cultures, centuries of religious traditions, both Jewish and Christian, and the two Testaments of the Christian Bible.”

—Ellen F. Davis
Amos Ragan Kearns Professor of Bible and Practical Theology
The Divinity School, Duke University
ILLUMINATING JUSTICE

The Ethical Imagination
of *The Saint John’s Bible*

JONATHAN HOMRIGHAUSEN

LITURGICAL PRESS
Collegeville, Minnesota
www.litpress.org
To Michelle Runyon
and
All whose hearts and minds are touched by
*The Saint John's Bible,*
especially those at Santa Clara University and
the Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida
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During solemn evening prayer on June 11, 2011, with the monks and the National Catholic Youth Choir singing Donald Busarow’s majestic *Te Deum*, Donald and Mabel Jackson processed down the central aisle of Saint John’s Abbey and University Church with the last page of the book of Revelation. They set it upon the altar for Abbot John Klassen and university president Father Bob Koopmann to emboss the gold leaf on the final word, *Amen*. Much had transpired from the time in 1996 when university president Brother Dietrich Reinhart, seeking counsel on the new venture, first gathered the theologians from the Saint John’s School of Theology and Seminary. While one might consider the project completed with the ceremony on that June night, the real hope was that the celebration would signal a beginning.

Initially, the idea was to do something grand, not simply to write a Bible by hand and to include some good artwork. The monks, faculty, and administrators thought that if handwriting the Bible were worth anything, it would have to do more than become an interesting project destined to sit on a shelf. Rather, it would have to address issues of the day, incorporate the culture, include the broad spectrum of the humanities, explore science, be conversant with music, art, and literature, raise questions of justice, speak to other faith traditions, and be hospitable to other people of goodwill. In a word, in order to be a successful endeavor, it would have to reflect the glory of God and the Christian mission at this point in the history of the world.

To raise the project to such a level, Brother Dietrich formed the Bible Task Force whose charge was to develop a plan that would not only see the completion of *The Saint John’s Bible* but one that would also ensure its influence on both Christian and non-Christian cultures once the ink was dry on the parchment. The Task Force settled, therefore, on six goals: ignite the imagination, glorify God’s word, revive tradition, discover history, foster
the arts, and give voice to the voiceless. Finally, the Task Force established
the Committee on Illumination and Text, or CIT, to provide the theological
input for the artists and to make the final decision on the images.

Following suit, the CIT employed these six objectives both in the initial
schema or outline as well as in the resulting theological briefs written for
each of the Bible’s seven volumes. Above all, the Task Force intended that
these goals continue well beyond the completion of the Bible. At no point,
thought the Task Force, should anyone consider *The Saint John’s Bible* to be
an end in itself.

During the fifteen years that the artists and scholars worked on *The Saint
John’s Bible* and continuing shortly after, books and articles contemporaneous
with the writing of the tome commented on and explained the production,
calligraphy, and illuminations. Jonathan Homrighausen’s *Illuminating Justice:
The Ethical Imagination of The Saint John’s Bible*, however, represents the first
generation of commentary outside the production phase of the Bible. More-
over, *Illuminating Justice*, as the first work to respond to the mission of the
Bible project, is also in the unique position of probing the completed Bible
from the perspective of an interested scholar outside those who produced it.

In opening this book and studying the chapters, readers should bring
their own experiences of Sacred Scripture to the text and images, and they
should let these experiences begin a dialogue with the word of God. Jonathan
Homrighausen did so, and the practice yielded the work you have before you.
To do the same with these images, indeed with all images in *The Saint John’s
Bible*, is to invite the Holy Spirit into the conversation so that the insight of
twenty-five hundred years of the biblical tradition can grow and flourish in
this millennium and beyond.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It takes a village to write a book. In the case of The Saint John’s Bible, that village was peopled by Donald and Mabel Jackson, the team of scribes and illuminators, the Committee on Illumination and Text headed by Michael Patella, the monks of Saint John’s Abbey, and the many administrators behind the scenes who coordinated plane flights, held fundraisers so the project could see the light of day, publicized it to the world, created and sold Heritage Editions and trade editions, and performed myriad tasks needed for this Bible to come into the world and reach hearts and minds. Thankfully, my book was far less complex to create. But I still owe my village a great debt.

When I first approached Hans Christoffersen of Liturgical Press to pitch a book idea on The Saint John’s Bible, I assumed I was one of many. To my surprise, he told me there was nothing in the pipeline in this area and was incredibly receptive to and excited by my ideas. My thanks to Hans for going to bat for this book and for trusting a younger writer.

Before working with The Saint John’s Bible, I had little background in art history and had never heard of the work on art and the Bible done by reception history and visual exegesis scholars. Along the journey of this project, I am particularly indebted to Kathleen Maxwell for her tutelage in the world of manuscript studies and illuminated Bibles. Thanks also to Andrea Sheaffer’s help on understanding visual exegesis, and the late Fr. Michael Morris’s instruction in Christian iconography. Also, my understanding of the technique—and the difficulty!—of calligraphy would be very limited were it not for Sara Loesch-Frank.

Many people gave special input for particular chapters. I first tested out my material on Jewish-Christian dialogue at the Midwest Conference on Christianity and Literature, on a travel grant from the Center for Arts, Religion, and Education at the Graduate Theological Union, which later hosted my brown bag lunch lecture on the same topic. Leah Machinskas-Le gave me valuable insight for this chapter, particularly on the Suffering Servant
Illuminating Justice

illumination, as did Andrea Pappas. Diana Gibson, Justin Staller, and several members of the Catholic Biblical Association shared their insights for my material on feminist biblical interpretation. A special thanks to Glynis Mary McManamon, Caroline Mackenzie, and Joshua Koffman for allowing me to use images of their art.

Two people deserve special praise. Kitty Murphy was my first guru into the world of academic biblical scholarship and a model of how to be a scholar grounded in the academy but in service to, and in the tradition of, a believing community. David Pleins brought me on as coauthor for my first book and mentored me through the process of publishing this second book.

My fellow enthusiasts and experts in The Saint John’s Bible likewise encouraged me at every step. Michael Patella, the chair of the Committee on Illumination and Text, encouraged me to dig deeper into this project, assured me that I was on the right track, and gave feedback on the entire book. Jason Paul Engel, OblSB, and Anne Kaese, ambassadors for The Saint John’s Bible who have shown it to thousands of people over many years, shared with me their stories of how this project has touched the hearts and minds of their audiences. Larry Fraher, who has incorporated The Saint John’s Bible into his recent dissertation (congratulations!) in Art and Religion at the Graduate Theological Union, shared with me some of his analyses of the illuminations. Susan Sink, whose book brims with insight into the illuminations, also answered a crucial question about the symbolism of the double-arched cathedral doorway. Thomas Ingmire and Suzanne Moore hosted me in their studios, regaling me with their stories behind each of their illuminations and filling in some details on what it was like to work with Jackson and the Committee. Conversations with Susan Wood, SCL, Irene Nowell, OSB, and Suzanne Moore also gave crucial insights. Special thanks to those who read all or part of the book draft: April Flowers, Michelle Runyon, David Pleins, Lucinda Mosher, Paul Crowley, SJ, Jason Paul Engel, OblSB, and Larry Fraher.

As The Saint John’s Bible has consumed me for the last two years, I have been helped along the way in expertise and encouragement by fellow enthusiasts and teachers in two communities. I got my start on this work at the invitation of Sheila Conway of Santa Clara University Archives & Special Collections, who first tasked me with promoting the university’s Heritage Edition. Sheila has been a constant dialogue partner and valuable skeptic. In writing a book, I suspect I went slightly beyond her expectations. My deepest appreciation also to the faculty of Santa Clara University and the Graduate Theological Union who let me test ideas for this book on their classes, including Kitty Murphy, Gary Macy, Diana Gibson, John Endres, SJ,
David Pleins, Jan Giddings, and Paul Crowley, SJ. Their students’ questions and comments gave me many insights.

Once I had the contract for this book in hand and an outline of each chapter, I received an opportunity out of the blue from the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Augustine, Florida, to teach a week-long intensive course on The Saint John’s Bible for their Summer School of Theology. I organized the course around this book and was rewarded with an abundantly insightful and excited group of students. My deepest gratitude to everyone in the course, and especially to Erin McGeever, the diocese’s Director of Formation, for extending me the opportunity and showing me the ecclesial sights of the diocese for the week.

Because this book emerges out of my teaching at Santa Clara and St. Augustine, I dedicate this book to all those in those communities whose lives are touched by The Saint John’s Bible. As always, I am forever indebted to Michelle Runyon for her support, patience, and continual encouragement to follow my passion and write this book. Michelle, may I reciprocate as well when the time comes for you to write your first book!

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PREFACE

The continuous process of remaining open and accepting of what may reveal itself through hand and heart on a crafted page is the closest I have ever come to God. Now, I am led to the making of the Bible as a celebration of the Word of God for the twenty-first century in modern scripts, and I realize now it is the thing I have been preparing for all my life.¹

—Donald Jackson, 2002

What am I doing, who is not a practicing Christian, not any affiliate to any major religion, with this job, with this Bible? Well, what I think I am doing is bringing an open mind. And what I am bringing is a . . . Christian cultural background, Western European, but also I’m seeing, in these ancient texts, totally relevant, instantly recognizable things which are going on around us.²

—Donald Jackson, 2012

Audacious as it sounds, it seems safe to declare The Saint John’s Bible the most amazing Bible of the third Christian millennium. From the first illumination of the genealogy in Matthew, to the writing of the final “Amen,” to its dissemination in galleries, Heritage Editions, and trade editions, people of all religions and walks of life are stunned by the beauty of this Bible.

What makes this Bible so appealing? For the last three years, I have presented the Heritage Edition of The Saint John’s Bible to hundreds of people, from college students to professional calligraphers to church groups to scholars. I have shown this Bible to secular undergraduates in introductory

Scripture courses with no exposure to the Bible, and I have shown it to members of the Catholic Biblical Association who have spent decades teaching and writing about Scripture. The effect is the same. This Bible succeeds as a work of art and a work of exegesis primarily because of its beauty.

The Saint John’s Bible is not just a work of art, however. This unique Bible functions as a work of Catholic biblical interpretation in visual form. By repeating visual motifs throughout its illuminations, this Bible creates connections between different parts of the canon and the issues of our own time—as if The Saint John’s Bible is a living, breathing entity creating “canonical conversations.” This book traces three canonical conversations on social justice in The Saint John’s Bible: a conversation on right relationship with Jews and Judaism; another on biblical women and feminist biblical interpretation; and finally, one on creation care. By focusing on these three conversations around contemporary ethical issues, we will see how The Saint John’s Bible invites its viewer-readers to bring their own ethical-sacramental imagination to bear on both Scripture and the world.

The symbolism of trees serves as a unifying thread throughout the three conversations. In the first chapter, we look at the first illumination of The Saint John’s Bible, the menorah frontispiece to Matthew that is Jesus’ family tree, and Paul’s image of the olive tree to describe the relationship between Jews and Christians. The chapter on women and Woman Wisdom begins with the Tree of Knowledge and ends with the Tree of Life. And for creation care, we see how every living tree is a tree of life from God. There is irony here: unlike most Bibles, The Saint John’s Bible is not printed on tree products, but written on vellum. The tree also represents stability, longevity, and the deep-rootedness of tradition, both hallmarks of The Saint John’s Bible and the Benedictine tradition that produced it.

One of the goals of The Saint John’s Bible is to “ignite the imagination,” not just of its creators, but of its viewers. Just as the creators of The Saint John’s Bible used their imaginations to make magnificent art, so I invite you to use your imagination as you approach The Saint John’s Bible and your own spiritual life. I hope this book spurs not only deeper exegesis, but also personal transformation.

As I write this book, I have in mind the many different audiences to whom I have had the pleasure of introducing The Saint John’s Bible, from professional calligraphers interested in its technique and scripts to biblical scholars focused on its exegesis. While I discuss this Bible with the depth

and nuance of a Scripture scholar, apart from the terms introduced in the first chapter I try to avoid technical jargon. I especially offer this book to ministers and preachers who wish to bring this remarkable Bible to their congregations, to the librarians and curators charged with showing the Heritage Edition in academic and museum contexts, and to undergraduate faculty who wish to bring *The Saint John's Bible* into courses on Scripture and theology.

This book in no way replaces the excellent works by Michael Patella, Susan Sink, and Christopher Calderhead, but merely offers a different window through which to look at *The Saint John's Bible*. Sink and Patella unpack individual illuminations, comprehensively surveying the whole project; however, they do not systematically survey the repeated symbolism of this Bible and its conversations between different parts of Scripture and contemporary Catholic biblical interpretation. Unlike them, I do not survey every illumination, only those which fit the themes of this book. Hence this book supplements, not replaces, previous works on this Bible. Nor do I pretend that mine is the last word!

At the start of *The Saint John's Bible* project, the Committee on Illumination and Text formulated three key themes that this Bible was to stress: hospitality, conversion of life, and justice for God's people. I hope that by the end of this book you will better understand some of the specific ways in which this Bible calls us to live these virtues. Just as *The Saint John's Bible* illuminates the Word, may this book illuminate those illuminations.
Chapter Three

TREE OF KNOWLEDGE, TREE OF LIFE
Women and Wisdom Women

Following in the footsteps of the Samaritan woman and Mary Magdalene in John’s gospel, women have read the Bible and preached Christ through the lens of their female experiences since Jesus’ earthly life. British Christian artist Caroline Mackenzie envisions a feminine image of God in her bronze sculpture *The Creator.*

Mackenzie’s female personification of Wisdom holds a hammer and chisel, since she “was beside him, like a master worker” (Prov 8:30) at creation.¹ Mackenzie explains that her work emerges from an engagement with Hindu art, which “link[s] female humanity with the divine”² by using both feminine and masculine incarnations of deities. Mackenzie’s *The Creator* might also be a self-portrait of a

² Caroline Mackenzie, “Intro,” *Caroline Mackenzie,* http://carolinemackenzie.co.uk/creative-women/.

[Image of a sculpture titled *The Creator* by Caroline Mackenzie (2013)]
woman artist who, in creating sculpture with tools like a hammer and chisel, herself embodies the creative spirit of Woman Wisdom.

Mackenzie’s work reminds us that Christian feminists express their faith not only through biblical scholarship but also through unleashing their creative imaginations to make theater, storytelling, midrash, music, art, and dance to envision a world that affirms the equality and dignity of all humanity. They focus on the “prophetic and liberating elements” of Christianity with “attention to the neglect of women’s full incorporation into the people of God.” In recent decades, Christian feminists have struggled with issues from feminine language for God, to empowering women as clergy, to critiquing patriarchal and sexist elements of Christianity.

Catholic feminist biblical interpretation, one strand of Christian feminism, has born fruits among scholars and laypeople for the past forty years. It has been given new life in the Wisdom Bible Commentary, a multivolume feminist commentary on every book of the Bible, edited by New Testament scholar Barbara Reid, OP.

While feminist biblical interpretation has at times been viewed with suspicion by the magisterium, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s on The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church concedes that “feminine sensitivity helps to unmask and correct certain commonly accepted interpretations which were tendentious and sought to justify the male domination of women.” While the Commission cautions against forms of feminism that “den[y] all authority to the Bible,” they accept forms of feminism that offer prophetic service to the church.

The Saint John’s Bible emphasizes key biblical women, often foregrounding their experience and their witness. Other times, it inserts women where they may not be explicit in the narrative. The key symbols for women in the art of The Saint John’s Bible are bright, colorful fabric patterns and shining silver. Jackson remarks that “textiles are deeply symbolic of interconnectivity. Interweaving threads join to make a wonderful whole.” The choice of textiles to symbolize the feminine reflects the importance of women in creating textiles in ancient Israel and the importance of women in many cultures for weaving together families and communities. Silver alludes to


6. Calderhead, Illuminating the Word, 98.

the moon and Woman Wisdom. Our story of women in this Bible begins and ends with trees: the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life in the Wisdom Books.

EVE AND THE SERPENT

Genesis 1:1–2:3: Creation
Genesis 2:4-25: Adam and Eve
Genesis 3:1-24: Garden of Eden

The figure of Eve in Genesis 1–3 is crucial in many Christian formulations of gender and womanhood, whether denigrating Eve as “weak and fickle” or celebrating her as “the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits.” These widely different interpretations result from the ambiguity of Eve in Genesis itself, an ambiguity recreated in Jackson’s Adam and Eve.

Modern historical critics separate the first creation story (Gen 1:1–2:3) from the second (Gen 2:4-25). Feminist exegetes have frequently noted that the first creation story does not establish any gender hierarchy, unlike the second one, in which Eve is fashioned from Adam’s side. In illuminating Genesis 1:1–2:3, the Committee intended to foreground gender equality, as God created both male and female in Her image: “humankind is first created as a species and then differentiated between male and female.” In the illumination of the first creation story, Creation, the sixth day—the sixth column in the image—displays both male and female in prehistoric cave paintings. The figure at the bottom of the column, who appears to be female, is intertwined with the image of the coral snake, alluding to what is to come in the Garden. But the image’s inclusion of both genders reminds the viewer that both male and female are made in the image of God.

The story of Adam and Eve’s eviction from the garden (Gen 3) frequently appears in arguments about the character of womankind. In one traditional Western Christian reading from Augustine onward, this expulsion represents humanity’s archetypal rebellion against God. Eve gets the blame for this loss of divine intimacy because she eats of the forbidden fruit first. Thus,

8. Reid, Wisdom’s Feast, 26, quoting John Chrysostom.
she becomes the seductress responsible for the downfall of humanity. More recent feminist scholars, however, have tried to rehabilitate Eve. They point out that Adam did not object to Eve’s eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, nor did he refuse to follow in her path. While Adam is passive and silent, Eve is “knowledgeable, articulate, and well-informed about God’s command. . . . Contrary to contemporary gender stereotypes, the woman is the vocal and active agent, the man is passive and acquiescent.”

Rather than the worst mistake in human history, perhaps the supposed “Fall” was merely a necessary step in the development of human independence and ability to know good and evil—and therefore to truly choose good. If eating the fruit is a good thing, then Eve should be commended for her initiative. If God did not want Adam and Eve to eat from the tree, why would God place the tree in the garden? Is Eve a Promethean culture hero or a contemptible temptress?

At first glance, *The Saint John’s Bible* reflects the traditional account of Eve as temptress. The illumination depicts Eve behind Adam surrounded by bright textile borders. *The Saint John’s Bible* uses textiles to symbolize feminine presence, hinting that Eve is the center of this story. Eve, whose face is in color and has more light, grins at a shadowy and grim Adam. Adam looks dead, indicating perhaps an inner spiritual death. The coral snake seems to have taken over Eve entirely: wraps around her neck, jewelry, and hair, comes out of her mouth, and forms her eyebrows. Donald Jackson’s choice of the beautiful yet highly poisonous coral snake to illuminate the serpent in the garden suggests that he may not read the serpent as a good figure, or Eve’s choice as a good one. Rather, she has brought poison into the world. Adam and Eve do not make eye contact, symbolizing the loss of their emotional and spiritual contact. The gold in this work is not illuminated because God’s presence is lost after the expulsion from the Garden.

Yet the snake imagery and Eve’s smile remain ambiguous. Eve may wear a malicious grin.

---

Jackson calls her “a deliciously mischievous girl.” It is also possible, however, to see her grin as the joy of one who has found knowledge, who has discovered the difference between good and evil. This image may capture the moment after Eve partook of the forbidden fruit but before Adam did so. Thus his grey face would be not the result of any fall, but the dullness of one who has not yet become a full human, a mock-up model of the final product. After all, what is more quintessentially human than an understanding of good and evil—a conscience? The previous illumination, *Garden of Eden*, hints at this possibility by including a patch of the mandala pattern from *Genealogy of Jesus* and *Luke Anthology*.

Adam and Eve’s eating from the tree is often deemed a *felix culpa*, a happy fault, because it led to the coming of Christ to reverse the Fall. In a typological reading of this illumination, perhaps Eve is smiling because she knows what her action will lead to: the coming of Jesus, whose parables continue to unveil the knowledge of good and evil.

In the right-hand margin of this illumination appears a quote from 2 Corinthians 3:18: “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.” This quotation works at multiple levels. Jackson remarks that “behind Eve is a platinum background, like a mirror, to refer to the quotation. . . . Eve and Adam are mirrors of us.”

In the context of 2 Corinthians 3, the veiling Paul mentions refers to the veil Moses puts over his face because he cannot look at the face of God, but also to the veil over the understanding of those who did not accept Christ. Adam and Eve experience an unveiled closeness with God—at least until they veil themselves from God by hiding after eating the forbidden fruit (Gen 3:8).

14. Ibid.
In the context of a Bible full of images, a quotation about seeing the glory of the Lord and the image of God evokes the power of art to inspire beatific vision. In the context of The Saint John’s Bible, the image of the glory of the Lord reflected in a mirror points forward to Woman Wisdom. We can also see Eve as the first of many powerful women in the Bible.

COURAGEOUS WOMEN OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Judges 4–5: Deborah Anthology
Esther 5:1-14: Esther
Ruth 1:1-22: Ruth and Naomi
Ruth 2:2-23: Ruth the Gleaner
2 Kings 22:1-20: Huldah the Prophetess

Biblical women are often stereotyped as meek, mild, and exclusively maternal. Despite the focus on men’s deeds in the Bible and the frequent childbirth necessary for cultural survival in the ancient world, which kept women mainly in the domestic sphere, several women in the Old Testament transgressed their expected roles at pivotal moments to deliver their people from distress. The Saint John’s Bible highlights the valor and value of these women for today.

Judges 4–5 gives us two stories of powerful women: Deborah, who was judge over Israel, and Jael, who delivered Israel from war with Canaan. Jael defeats a man precisely because he assumes a mere woman would not attack him. Sisera, a Canaanite leader, was leading a war against Israel when he stopped in Jael’s tent for some refreshment. After serving him some milk and lulling him to sleep, Jael drives a tent peg through his temple. Gruesome as this sounds, it becomes less so when the author of Judges hints that he raped women taken in war (Judg 5:30).16

The illumination is delightfully ambiguous: Who is the woman in the image? Patella labels her as Deborah because of her stately, regal attire, while Sink marks her as Jael because she is holding the tent peg.¹⁷ Perhaps Jackson intended this image to represent them both. Certainly the fearsome face of the woman in this image could represent either Deborah or Jael. Deborah and, to a lesser extent, Jael have been at the center of disputes among Jews and Christians about women holding leadership roles.¹⁸

The Saint John’s Bible highlights the figure of Esther as a woman who wields great power and courage in saving the people of Israel, but undergoes significant personal trauma to do so. In the book telling her story, Esther is a young Jewish woman who becomes queen of Persia by winning the king Ahasuerus over with her charm and beauty. (Ahasuerus demoted his previous queen, Vashti, because she would not display her beauty to his drunken friends.) After averting an attempted genocide of her people, Esther leads the Jews in a slaughter of thousands of Persians.

Feminist exegetes are divided on Esther. Some favor Vashti, who refused to support the king’s demeaning demand at great personal cost, over Esther who, they allege, played into the patriarchal system: “For many women, Vashti is the more palatable female character, since she directly challenges the status quo.”¹⁹ Yet other feminist interpreters have turned to Esther as an example of a woman who did what she had to do. Angeline M.G. Song terms this the “pragmatism of the powerless,” the ability to survive and thrive in a hostile system by playing its games to subtly empower oneself.²⁰ She focuses on both the trauma and the power dynamics of Esther’s story as a window on today.

Jackson’s Esther highlights her trauma as she navigates the power dynamics of her situation. Esther’s face is divided down the middle, indicating the difficulty of her double life as both queen in the palace and subjugated Jew in diaspora. Like Deborah-Jael, her monarchical side sports a

rich headdress made up of elements from Persian and Palestinian adornments. She looks made-up in two senses of the word: she wears the cosmetics and jewelry of a queen, and she is disguising her true self. The look on her queenly face is reminiscent of a model in a catalog, the kind of sultry “come hither” look some women wear as a mask to attract men. But on her Jewish side, the same facial expression appears shadowy, as if she has donned ashes alongside the rest of her people facing their pogrom (Esth 4:1-3). The text of Esther 14:15 and 14:19 below her further highlight her ambivalence about the royal garments she must don. Jackson based this illumination on Gustav Klimt’s Judith and the Head of Holofernes (1901), a portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer, his patroness who was married to a wealthy older man—like Esther, a woman who uses her sexuality as a form of power in a world of limited options. The Saint John’s Bible highlights the trauma of Esther’s sexual servitude and the pain of colonization, but it also celebrates Esther’s intelligence and ingenuity in hiding her identity to save her people.

Esther, a woman of Israel, ascends to the palace of a foreign people. Ruth does the opposite. A Moabite by birth, she becomes an Israelite, an ancestor of David, and a prototype for Jewish converts to this day. The book of Ruth, though one of the shortest books in the Old Testament, has three illuminations: Donald Jackson’s Ruth Genealogy and Suzanne Moore’s Ruth and Naomi and Ruth the Gleaner. Moore’s pieces focus on Ruth and her relationship with Naomi. Their bond exemplifies an uncommon phenomenon in the Bible: a nuanced portrait of a close bond between two women. Ruth’s bold proposal to Boaz on behalf of Naomi testifies to Ruth’s courage and loyalty.

The first illumination, *Ruth and Naomi*, reflects their friendship. They stand or sit next to each other, reminiscent of Mary and Martha’s posture in *Jesus with Mary and Martha* in Luke. Here they embrace as they look forward with fear and faith as widows. Above their heads Moore inserts geometric patterns, “a reflection of mathematical principles and proportions found in nature . . . to suggest a sort of cosmic order to the universe.”

Even as Ruth and Naomi might not see how their fate will turn out, God has a plan for them. Moore emphasizes their commonality in their similar appearance: “who can say which one is the foreigner?”

On the next page, Moore’s portrait of Ruth gleaning in the field looks back to *Ruth and Naomi*. She is thinking about her mother-in-law while she is in the fields. Her head is upright, proud, brave. At the illumination’s center is a circular vortex: a bundle of wheat in Ruth’s cloak, alluding to the agricultural plenty that Ruth and Naomi found in Bethlehem “at the beginning of the barley harvest” (Ruth 1:22), in contrast to the famine in Moab where the story of Ruth begins. The bundle may also be Ruth’s womb pregnant with Obed, or the cosmos itself. Ruth’s skirt dances as she moves through the field gleaning, perhaps a joyful dance like that of Woman Wisdom in Moore’s *Praise of Wisdom*.

Women were not only judges and converts in ancient Israel but also prophets. One such prophet, Huldah (2 Kgs 22:1-20), receives a full illumination hinting at the contributions of women to a Bible written most likely entirely by men. During

23. Ibid., 54.
24. Ibid., 55.
the reign of Josiah, the high priest Hilkiah finds a book of laws in the sanctuary. Josiah consults Huldah the prophetess about what God is planning to do. Huldah gives Josiah a pessimistic prognosis: Judah will be conquered and taken into foreign captivity in Babylon, but Josiah will not live to see it. Although her advice launched “sweeping religious reforms,” she may have been relatively independent from the temple.25 The officials go to her home to consult her, hinting that she is distinct from the prophets at the royal-religious complex. Although the author of 2 Kings gives us only a brief passage about this prophetess, “it is intriguing to wonder whether Huldah may

have prophesied much more than this one instance and whether many of her words have been lost to us. We wish that a book of Huldah had survived.” Moore’s *Huldah the Prophetess* follows up on this suggestion. The illumination is divided in two pages. On the first page, a double-arched doorway taken from Huldah’s gate at the Temple Mount in Jerusalem represents temple and royal court—the institutions of Hilkiah and Josiah. Moore explains that double doors also represent heaven (left) and infinity (right). Separated from the temple doors is a whirling vortex with words pouring forth. Sink writes, “The primary image is that of a quill, from which unrolls an image of a scroll.” Moore borrowed letters from sacred texts in several languages, including the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Cherokee alphabet. The words spilling out onto the page emanate more from Huldah’s realm than from Hilkiah’s. On the next page, a large vortex pattern symbolizes a rolled scroll, but also the chaos of prophetic power and the cosmos. If the scroll represents the preservation of law and history, then the image hints at Huldah’s role behind these traditions as we know them today. What role did women play in the development of the oral and written traditions that made their way into the Old Testament? Even if no woman wrote down the words of the Bible, were their oral traditions written down and copied by male scribes?

Moore deliberately connects the cosmic vortex of *Huldah the Prophetess* with Ruth’s womb in *Ruth the Gleaner*, also alluding to other cosmic imagery such as *To the Ends of the Earth* in Acts. The womb gives new life to individuals just as God’s creation of the cosmos gives new life to humanity. The wheat stalks emerging from Ruth’s basket look like the bird feathers used to make quills to write *The Saint John’s Bible*, the quill also in *Huldah the Prophetess*. If the scroll of Huldah is also the womb of Ruth, then we might

think of Ruth’s womb as another biblical author: without Ruth there would be no line of descent to Jesus, thus no New Testament.

In the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1977 document analyzing the possibility of women becoming priests, the Commission notes the presence of these exemplary women in the Bible:

There are women who bore the name of prophetess (Maria, Deborah, Huldah, Noiada), while not playing the role of the great prophets. Other women exercised an important function for the salvation of the people of God at critical moments of this people’s history (for example, Judith, Esther).\textsuperscript{33}

These women point to the fact that women were \textit{not} always in the background, the stage crew in a world dominated by the theater of men. At times they came forward with a pivotal role in Israel’s male-dominated political and military spheres. \textit{The Saint John’s Bible} does these women justice by highlighting and magnifying their presence and power.

**WOMEN IN THE BIRTH AND MINISTRY OF JESUS**

\textbf{Luke 2:1-14: Birth of Christ}  
\textbf{Luke 1:46-55: Magnificat}  
\textbf{Jeremiah 1:1-10: Now the Word}  
\textbf{John 11:1-44: Raising of Lazarus}  
\textbf{Luke 10; 15; 16: Luke Anthology and Jesus with Mary and Martha}

Just as \textit{The Saint John’s Bible} highlights the role of women at pivotal moments in ancient Israel, it also highlights pivotal women in the life of Jesus, from before his birth to after his resurrection. By focusing on the experiences of these women and their witness, \textit{The Saint John’s Bible} engages in the remembering of women’s witness crucial for feminist biblical interpretation.

This remembering begins with the women important in Jesus’ life even before his birth. On the very first page of \textit{Gospels and Acts, Genealogy of Jesus}, the frontispiece to Matthew, displays Jesus’ family tree as a menorah. While Matthew mentions only five women in the genealogy, Jackson incorporates \textit{all} the women in his illumination, finding their names scattered throughout the Old Testament. The five women named in the genealogy do not paint a picture of Jesus’ perfect, priestly pedigree. Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite are foreigners. Bathsheba and Tamar conceived their sons out of wedlock.

Mary became pregnant while still betrothed, as “the divine family plan moves in ways that contravene traditional family values.”34 Jackson’s choice to include all women—even Hagar—signals a strong feminist reading of Matthew’s genealogy, even as it lessens Matthew’s focus on outsiders and the marginalized.35

In one subtle symbolic connection, Jackson emphasizes the miracle of maternity in the birth of Jesus. In Birth of Christ, the frontispiece to Luke, Jackson supplies the only illumination of Jesus’ mother Mary in The Saint John’s Bible. Here, she leans joyfully over the manger, with its Jesus absent because we are to place him there in our own lives.36 On the next page, Mary’s Magnificat is augmented with a special text treatment in radiant gold.


The Magnificat is central not only to Catholic devotion and liturgy but also to feminist biblical interpreters who deem it “the great New Testament song of liberation . . . a revolutionary document of intense conflict and victory,” and from it argue that Mary is a prophet. The Saint John’s Bible connects Mary with the Old Testament prophetic tradition by using the same script and chrysography—gold letters—to write God’s words calling Jeremiah to prophesy.


Just as Jeremiah is consecrated to be a prophet while in the womb, so Mary serves as a prophet while Jesus is in her womb, and likewise the fetal Jesus is called to be a prophet before his birth. Both the background of Magnificat and Mary’s cloak in Birth of Christ are in the royal blue traditionally associated with Mary—though supplemented in Birth of Christ by Mary’s bold red shirt under her cloak.39

As the border to Birth of Christ, Jackson employs a textile pattern used only also in Raising of Lazarus. In this illumination, the viewer looks from the perspective of Lazarus inside the tomb, rather than the crowd outside the tomb. We are Lazarus, seeking resurrection.

Lazarus sits up and moves toward the light at the end of the tunnel, symbolizing Jackson’s mother’s near-death experience when giving birth to him.40 By connecting his own birth with Lazarus’ new life, Jackson links Jesus’ miracle of raising Lazarus with the miracle of new life worked through women worldwide. The connection between Lazarus’ rebirth and women’s childbirth also evokes Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha, who place faith in

40. Patella, Word and Image, 264.
Jesus by appealing to him for a miracle in saving their brother (John 11:3). Mary was not just a random vessel. Her faith and witness, demonstrated by her canticle and her courage in bearing a baby despite social stigma, make her a prophet and miracle worker in her own right.

In Jesus’ ministry, women such as Mary and Martha performed crucial roles as witnesses to and disciples of Jesus. The *Luke Anthology* illuminates several parables from Luke. From top to bottom, the parables are the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10), the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:4-7), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31). The parables are illuminated in diagonal strips running up to a pure golden Jesus at top right. Mary and Martha are below.
Jesus, listening, in the audience when Jesus tells some of the parables in this illumination (Luke 10:38-42). Their familial, friendly posture alludes to *Ruth and Naomi*.

Jesus' words to Martha are often used to justify the exclusion of women from leadership positions in the church, for Mary has chosen the better part: silently listening to the teachings of Jesus, in contrast to Martha's service, her *diakonia*. Many modern women, however, struggling to balance the demands of work and family while still carving out time for prayer, find themselves identifying with Martha.

Rather than esteeming one over the other, *The Saint John’s Bible* values both Mary's contemplation and Martha's service. Jackson depicts Mary on the left, sitting in contemplation, while Martha on the right stands with her hands on her hips as if she has paused from walking. The textile pattern to her right, with circles containing crosses that look like eucharistic bread, reminds us that Mary is not just tidying up while ignoring the priceless teaching spoken in her home. She is like the members of many churches' altar guilds, who set up the bread and the wine in the sacristy before each service. Their work remains unseen by the community at large, but is necessary for the Eucharist to take place. Luke refers to Martha's service as *diakonia*, a word used elsewhere in the New Testament to refer to setting a table for a meal and, more broadly, to many types of service for Christian communities. But Jackson also suggests that as Martha was walking around the house setting up the meal for the disciples, she might have paused once or twice to listen to a teaching from Jesus that particularly spoke to her heart. She may have also been listening from the kitchen.

Medieval theologians read Luke 10:38–42 as an allegory for the relationship between the active and the contemplative lives. Theologians such as Meister Eckhart saw Mary and Martha as two sides of the same coin of the spiritual life: “today as feminists critique binary oppositions and dualistic either/or thinking, we must think instead of the importance of both sisters and their choices.” This illumination signifies the importance of Mary and Martha’s contemplation in its use of the mandala imagery from *Genealogy of Jesus*.

43. Susan Felch, “Reading and Re-Reading the Story of Martha and Mary” (paper presented at Midwest Conference on Christianity and Literature, Spring Arbor University, Spring Arbor, MI, February 19–20, 2016).
45. Ibid., 117–18.
Donald Jackson tells us that this imagery refers to “the birth of intellect,” the human activity of making sense of the world around us. Both sisters must contemplate the riddling parables in this illumination, must make sense of them in their own lives. Given that this pattern also appears in Garden of Eden, we are also invited to draw a connection between Eve as she gains knowledge of good and evil—a necessary step in the maturity of humankind—and Mary and Martha as they learn about forgiveness and the kingdom of heaven from Jesus. Mary and Martha’s turned backs invite the viewer to join them both in Jesus’ audience. Men and women alike can identify with the Mary-Martha dynamic. We are all Mary or Martha at different points in our lives.

One of the parables Mary and Martha contemplate contains a female image of God: the parable of the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10) in which the woman has nine coins and seeks one. The lost coin is the most important, the one worth rejoicing over once it is found. In this parable, God seeks the lost coin—the sinner lost to God. Jesus could have told this parable with a man searching for a coin, but instead he chooses a woman. The silver color of the coin connects the woman of the parable with Woman Wisdom. We may see this parable as a parable for today’s Christian women searching for their stories in Scripture and in Christian history. Even if those stories are little preserved, when they are found there is great rejoicing. Mary and Martha become the modern women of faith, struggling to balance contemplation and action in their own lives, claiming their narratives in the Bible and the Christian tradition.

WOMEN IN THE DEATH AND RESURRECTION OF JESUS

John 20:1-31: Resurrection
John 1:35-51: Call of the Disciples
Luke 7:36-50: Dinner at the Pharisee’s House

The gospels’ narratives of the presence of women at the foot of the cross and the empty tomb provide sources for women’s spirituality and witness today. Though the identities of the women at the cross vary among the four evangelists, each gospel features women as those who first find the empty

46. Calderhead, Illuminating the Word, 191.
tomb, giving the gospel writer a chance to demonstrate the faith of the female disciples apart from the male twelve. Through its repeated imagery, *The Saint John’s Bible* heightens the role of these women. The illuminations especially focus on Mary Magdalene, the only woman present at both the cross and the empty tomb in all four gospels.

The only illumination of the passion narrative in *The Saint John’s Bible* is *Crucifixion* in Luke, which features a subtle allusion to the presence of the women at the foot of the cross. A purely golden Christ shines on the cross, which is askew like the world is topsy-turvy when Jesus dies.
crooked cross contrasts with the upright pillar of light in Birth of Jesus. An often overlooked feature of this illumination is the subtle gold lace pattern around its borders. This lace appears in only one other book: the Song of Solomon, which features a woman yearning for her male beloved, often allegorized as God or Jesus. The lace border in I Am My Beloved’s (Song 6:3) evokes the presence of the women at the foot of the cross in all four gospels, especially Mary Magdalene and Mary, mother of Jesus. In making this connection, The Saint John’s Bible repeats an association in medieval Western liturgy between the woman in the Song and the lament of Jesus’ mother, who likewise cries out for her beloved at the foot of the cross. This lament is captured in the art of the pietà and the music of the Stabat Mater.

The lace also suggests a close intimacy between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Like Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene is a key figure for feminist interpreters. While defending Mary Magdalene against the medieval charge that she was a prostitute, these exegetes sing Mary’s positive praises as well: she is the “first disciple of the Risen Jesus,” and “the only known disciple whose faithfulness to Jesus does not waver.” The Saint John’s Bible gives her a full-page treatment in Resurrection, which depicts the key moment in John 20 when Jesus tells her not to hold on to him, for he has not yet ascended.

In this image, she has already recognized him, as she calls out “Rabbouni!” in the Aramaic letters next to her. The focus is on Mary Magdalene’s face lit by Jesus, rather than on the enigmatic back of Christ himself. Like Mary Magdalene, we too must let go of Jesus’ physical form, as we cannot see his face in this illumination. Jesus’ light on Mary Magdalene alludes to the theme of the duality of light and darkness running throughout John’s gospel. Jesus is the light. The look on her face is enlightened wonder.

The Saint John’s Bible subtly hints at Mary Magdalene in two other Gospels illuminations. A swatch of her dress appears in Call of the Disciples, a text that omits the female disciples. Jackson implies that Mary Magdalene is


a disciple on a par with the men, even though no gospel narrates the story of her call. This fragment of her dress is in the edge of the illumination, signifying the marginalization of women as disciples of Jesus. Yet in John 20, she is front and center, while the men are absent.

Likewise, Mary Magdalene’s dark skin, awe-filled expression, and red dress in *Resurrection* strongly resemble that of the woman with the alabaster
jar in *Dinner at the Pharisee's House*. This woman is frequently conflated with Mary Magdalene in Christian tradition, though the text does not make that identification.\(^{52}\) Her expression is one of humble determination—a sinner striving to serve Jesus despite the ridicule she receives from others in the house. Jackson focuses on this face, leaving Simon the Pharisee out of the illumination. The woman with the alabaster jar and Mary Magdalene have a similar face. Their dark skin is uncharacteristic of Western Christian art, which often depicts the Judeans of the New Testament as pale-skinned Europeans. By connecting these women, *The Saint John’s Bible* evokes the interconnected network of illuminations highlighting the role of female disciples in Jesus’ life and ministry. Jackson’s paintings of Mary Magdalene ask us: “Do you see this woman?”\(^{53}\)


THE WOMAN AND THE DRAGON:
THE SUM OF ALL BIBLICAL WOMEN

Revelation 12:1-18: Woman and the Dragon

Most of the books of The Saint John’s Bible are a collaboration between multiple scribes and illuminators. But for the grand finale of the project, Jackson decided he would write and illuminate the book of Revelation entirely on his own. As he did so, he drew on the repertoire of symbols and motifs he had created for the previous seven volumes, making Revelation’s illuminations echo themes throughout the Bible. The illumination of the Woman and the Dragon in Revelation 12 symbolically unifies many of the powerful models of womanhood throughout The Saint John’s Bible, from Eve to Mary Magdalene.

Modern readers of Revelation 12 have pointed out that this passage provides an empowering image of feminine courage. The woman is described in royal, astrological terms. Her power over the moon and the stars indicates that she controls the fate of the universe. Her crown signifies her royalty. The woman is often interpreted as Mary, mother of Jesus, or as a symbol of the persecuted church. But while the woman is a prominent image, the actual agents in this story are men. The woman is both under attack by a male serpent and defended by a male archangel, Michael. In Jackson’s illumination, however, Michael is represented only by his sword. The art focuses on the woman.

Her body language is clear: confronting a serpent trying to devour her soon-to-be-born baby, she places her hand firmly on her belly, showing her maternal protectiveness. Jackson used his wife,

Mabel Jackson, as the model for this hand. While the text does not tell us about her emotions and experiences, Jackson paints on her face a powerful, determined gaze, not fear or desperation.

This woman, however, does not stand alone. The Saint John’s Bible sets her in solidarity with many other women in the Bible. The serpent attacking her is the coral snake that tempts Eve. Her headdress is that of Esther. Her garment is both Mary Magdalene’s and Jesus’ cloaks in Resurrection, and is supplemented by a royal purple streak. Her face is that of Mary Magdalene and the woman with the alabaster jar—the dark skin of an indigenous woman. Through this image’s summing-up of many other biblical women, Jackson creates an image for Christian women today: not fearful, but determined, drawing on biblical witnesses such as Eve, Mary Magdalene, Esther, and Woman Wisdom herself.

**WOMAN WISDOM**

Wisdom of Solomon 7:22b-30: *Wisdom Woman*
Sirach 24:1-34: *Praise of Wisdom*
Sirach 35: *She Is a Reflection*
Proverbs 31:10-31: *Woman of Valor*
Sirach 6:14-22: *Faithful Friends*
Wisdom of Solomon 7: *Correction bee*
Sirach 39:13-15: *Listen*
Sirach 51: *Carpet page*

For the Wisdom Books, Jackson and the Committee chose to focus on Woman Wisdom, the most prominent feminine image of God in the Old Testament, also known as Sophia. Throughout the Wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, wisdom was frequently personified as a woman. Woman Wisdom is described as both an aspect and a creation of God, dwelling in

Israel and working in its history, promising prosperity and blessing to those who follow her.58 Some feminist scholars even argue that she is the remnant of a goddess tradition in Israel. Woman Wisdom is the bridge between the human and the divine, and is an architect of creation.59

While gold represents the presence of God throughout The Saint John’s Bible, silver or platinum represents the presence of Woman Wisdom.60 The premier image of Woman Wisdom in The Saint John’s Bible is Wisdom Woman.

58. Roland E. Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 133–49.
60. Sink, The Art of The Saint John’s Bible, 98.
Woman, which accompanies a long homage to Wisdom in Wisdom of Solomon. This illumination depicts Woman Wisdom as an old woman, beaming at the viewer in a silver mirror with a smile described as “knowing” and “secretive,” but also intimate.61 The image is a silkscreen of a photo of an elderly Palestinian woman that Donald Jackson had in his studio for several decades. He did not know why he was attracted to this photo, but when he was brainstorming this illumination, he realized it would fit perfectly.62 Her smile and age convey that she is wise and experienced, willing to share her wisdom with those who accept her invitation. Just as Woman Wisdom is playful and joyful (Prov 8:30), so is Wisdom Woman.

The mirror-shaped illumination echoes Wisdom 7:26, which describes Woman Wisdom as “a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness.” Just as Jesus with Mary and Martha invites viewers to join Mary and Martha listening to Jesus, so this illumination reflects to its viewer the question: How might you reflect Wisdom? The Arab calendric diagram around her face in the mirror shows the twenty-eight phases of the moon.63 The moon is traditionally a feminine symbol, associated with the menstrual cycle. The silver and gold bars around the central portrait allude to the presence of God and Woman Wisdom—the mutuality of masculine and feminine images of God.64

In the New Testament, the Old Testament’s image of Woman Wisdom as companion of God becomes Jesus, the Son of God. The Saint John’s Bible makes this connection through the astronomical imagery in the four corners of the mirror in Wisdom Woman and in Word Made Flesh, the frontispiece to John’s gospel. This imagery meditates on both Woman Wisdom and the Cosmic Christ at creation. The figure of Christ in Word Made Flesh is half formed, as if the viewer sees the incarnation in media res—perhaps even without a definite gender yet.

The exaltation of Woman Wisdom continues in Suzanne Moore’s Praise of Wisdom. Moore invites us to join Woman Wisdom in exalting the beauty of God’s handiwork. Though this illumination shows Moore’s highly abstract style, symbols in the piece reflect the agricultural imagery in the text. The leaves and fruit reflect floral metaphors for Wisdom (Sir 24:13-17). The

61. Ibid., 132.
63. Patella, Word and Image, 176.
64. On this point I am indebted to Anne Kaese.
warm brown colors of the illumination allude to Wisdom’s being sweeter than honey (Sir 24:20), and the patch of the blue on the right side of the image links it to water imagery (Sir 24:25-31). The pattern at top right looks like a cross, but also reflects prehistoric fertility statues, which, according to some, represent cultic statues from goddess worship of prehistoric Europe.65 The lines in the lower left draw from the supposed sacred script associated with these goddess figurines.66 Indeed, according to current Old Testament scholars, the biblical Woman Wisdom may be a remnant of worship of the goddess Asherah in ancient Israel. At bottom right a subtle cross image alludes to Jesus’ agricultural abundance in Loaves and Fishes in Mark. Women are the life-bearers in the human realm: Moore’s agricultural plenty alludes back to her Ruth the Gleaner with its basket of wheat. As Moore says, the oldest feminine symbol is “the abundance of the table.”67 Woman Wisdom dances across the pages in silver half circles—according to Moore, half-moons. The beauty of creation hints at the presence of God in the female Wisdom.

All five scribes who worked on Wisdom Books added their own homage to Woman Wisdom in the form of five marginal text treatments.68 Many of these treatments are not located next to the text of that verse, but are placed throughout the volume. Two of these focus on texts not otherwise treated: Wisdom 6:12, located at Job 15, and Sirach 1:16. The other three feature texts also treated in illuminations: Sirach 24:19, found at Sirach 13; Sirach 24:12, 13, 15-17, found at Sirach 44; and Wisdom 7:26, found at Sirach 35.

67. Much of the information in this paragraph comes from Suzanne Moore, personal communication, July 7, 2017.
This last text treatment includes the yin-yang symbol from Daoist philosophy and art. We might see this as a symbol of the relationship between masculine and feminine images of God: both necessary, neither by itself sufficient in grasping the mystery of a God who is beyond gender. The silver background again points to Woman Wisdom.

Wisdom is not only an abstract personification of a divine figure. She is present in the workings of ordinary human women. Proverbs 31, *Woman of Valor*, is often read by feminist interpreters as a hymn to Wisdom. Hazel Dolby meditates on this passage using the image of a colorful tapestry—the symbol par excellence of women in *The Saint John's Bible*, here in a rich royal purple.

Weaving and textile making are mentioned throughout Proverbs 31 as activities of the woman of valor, for whom “strength and dignity are her clothing” (Prov 31:25). To create this image, Hazel Dolby “looked at the role of African women in family life: the nurturing of children, plants, animals, the home and cooking [and] also the role of women in the community: valued for their wisdom and practicality.” Indeed, one wonders if the figure of Woman Wisdom is born not from goddess worship, but from the archetypal role of grandmothers in conveying cultural knowledge and stories. Proverbs 31 does not just idealize women’s work, but “theologically legitimate[s]” the labor of women as a means of instruction and an example of godliness.

What happens to women when they become aware of Sophia’s divine power within themselves? . . . Women begin to value their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Through Sophia’s presence in their lives what they think becomes important, what they feel becomes legitimate, what they experience becomes real.

Woman Wisdom does not pray in eternal seclusion in a contemplative realm. Wisdom reveals Her message in everyday life and through ordinary people, especially women.

The woman of Proverbs 31 is not only Woman Wisdom but may also be any of the human biblical women examined in this chapter. Hazel Dolby’s illumination includes the image of a bee. The Hebrew word for “bee,” devorah, connects this image to Deborah and Deborah Anthology. The hymn to the woman of valor in Proverbs 31 could be Deborah or any other woman—including any female reader of this Bible. The honeybee as image of Woman Wisdom appears again in the text treatments to Sirach 6:14-22 and 39:13-15, passages extolling Woman Wisdom. Diane Von Arx’s treatments of these passages include honeycomb patterns in the background, drawn from the church of Saint John’s Abbey for her treatment of 6:14-22, she includes a quilt pattern background continuing the theme of textiles and women. Further,
the correction in Wisdom of Solomon 7 is a small bee hoisting the missing line into its proper place with a pulley system based on da Vinci’s notebooks.74

In traditional Christian symbolism, the bee represents “activity, diligence, work, and order” as well as “sweetness and religious eloquence.”75 When

74. Sink, The Art of The Saint John’s Bible, 133.
75. Ferguson, Signs and Symbols in Christian Art, 12.
Ezekiel eats the scroll initiating him as a prophet, he tells us that it “was as sweet as honey” (Ezek 3:3). Here, the sweet, diligent Woman Wisdom is Deborah and any other woman. Perhaps she is the diligent Martha, working hard to make possible the breaking of bread. Woman Wisdom places Scripture into its proper order. Without Wisdom’s order, Scripture’s words themselves would be out of place.

The last text treatment of Wisdom Books, Sirach 51’s carpet page, echoes the floral imagery of Sirach 24:13-17. The Tree of Life comes right after a poem praising Wisdom in Sirach 51:13-30. Here the interconnected circles motif, found throughout Wisdom Books, forms a Tree of Life, another prominent symbol of wisdom in the Bible. The pattern is derived from an Indian textile with mirrors sewn in.76 These circles in turn call to mind the moon cycle in Wisdom Woman and the pearls of knowledge that Wisdom gives forth. Underneath the tree is another verse praising Wisdom:

She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her;
those who hold her fast are called happy. (Prov 3:18)

The colors of this tree echo the luscious reds and browns of the Song of Solomon illuminations, Garden of Desire (Song 4:1-15) and I Am My Beloved’s (Song 6:3), further conveying the femininity and intimacy of Wisdom.77 This circular motif also appears in Woman and the Dragon. Woman Wisdom is the Tree of Life (Sir 24:12-19).

77. Ibid., 143.
CONCLUSION

In sum, the symbolism of textiles and silver and the foregrounding of women in *The Saint John’s Bible* invite the reader to consider women’s witness to godliness and justice in our own time. Beginning this chapter with the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, we concluded it with the Tree of Life. Woman Wisdom, as the Tree of Life, reverses the rupture of our intimacy with God created by the rebellious eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. In the sacramental imagination, in which God is radically present in creation, *many* Trees of Life give us intimacy with God: the trees in our own backyard.


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