# Beautiful words: The St. John's Bible project

by Jason Byassee in the August 9, 2005 issue

Bibles are cheap. In their zeal to make scripture accessible to everyone, Protestants have manufactured Bibles in almost every language and made them available for startlingly small sums. Perhaps in doing so they have unwittingly made the Bible cheap not just financially, but theologically. Whereas Wycliffe and Tyndale devoted their lives to creating a Bible in the vernacular, modern folks have access to plenty of Bibles but are not very interested in reading them.

The St. John's Bible is not cheap. It is being produced by dozens of scholars and artists who have been laboring for almost a decade, at a cost of about $4 million, to create the first handwritten, illuminated Bible in five centuries. Even reproductions of the seven-volume Bible will be pricey. A museum-quality facsimile will cost thousands of dollars. The one trade volume available, Gospels and Acts (Liturgical Press), runs $64.95. This is a long way from the two bucks it takes the Gideons to produce a New Testament. In fact, chief calligrapher Donald Jackson and his colleagues are producing something priceless—a Bible beautiful enough to make readers want to keep reading, and even want to praise God.

The project began with a decision by St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, to commemorate the second millennium of Christ's birth in grand fashion. The Benedictine order has long been devoted to manuscript preservation. In the Middle Ages the order copied precious books that would otherwise have been lost. In the Internet age, it continues to work on the stewardship and dissemination of manuscripts.

St. John's decided to produce a Bible with all the trappings of the greatest editions of the past—using gold leaf, calfskin pages, quill pens and so on. But the project would also draw on modern resources, such as computers to plot out the spacing and provide schemata for the calligraphers. To oversee the work they tapped Jackson, chief calligrapher for the queen of England, whose life ambition was to produce a

handwritten Bible. St. John's allowed him to choose a team of assistants. A committee of theologians and biblical scholars directs the project from Minnesota.

The St. John's Bible, due to be completed in 2007 and roughly halfway there, has been called "America's Book of Kells" by *Newsweek*. It may be far more important than that, for this text is meant not only to be beautiful, like a museum object, but to inspire a renewed love of scripture. It is meant to be read at home and used in liturgy.

The three finished volumes—Gospels and Acts, the Pentateuch, Psalms—have been on display at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, and there are plans for a nationwide tour. Beautiful as the trade volume is, the originals must be seen to be believed. The handsome script, specially designed for the SJB, is as beautiful as that of any ancient manuscript. Its rich texture invites the eye to continue reading; the words are so aesthetically pleasing you don't want to stop. Texture is a key word in this project. The production of these volumes is more like the patient and loving knitting of a fine garment than the printing of a book.

Christopher Calderhead, author of *Illuminating the Word*: *The Making of the Saint John's Bible* (Liturgical), points out that in the case of a modern book the reader is the first to see any particular copy—it is sometimes wrapped in cellophane at the printer's and opened for the first time by the purchaser. The St. John's Bible, in contrast, has been lovingly and excruciatingly pored over by a highly trained scribe, illuminated by a master artist, planned and supported by a monastery and a university's theology faculty.

The illuminations themselves are inspired not only by ancient Christian canons, such as Orthodox icons, but also by modern art. The serpents biting the Israelites in Numbers 21 are so many jagged lines, which seem to threaten to jump off the page. The demons in the Gospels' exorcism stories are portrayed as a wave of screaming creatures that call to mind Picasso's *Guernica*.

Modern science is incorporated in an illumination of Jesus' lineage at the opening of Matthew: a Jewish menorah serves as Jesus' family tree, with his ancestors' names written in Hebrew and English. The whole is superimposed on an image of a DNA double helix, indicating both his human nature and the relatedness of all humanity in him. In Acts, Jesus' sending of his apostles to the ends of the earth is illumined with an image of Earth from space taken by the Hubble telescope.

Perhaps most striking, the SJB is fully Christian without being exclusive in its sensibility. Hebrew lettering is used throughout, both to name Old Testament books and to reflect the smattering of Aramaic in the New Testament. The Jewish provenance of the scriptures is thus unmistakable. Hagar's name is written in Arabic as a nod to her descendant Muhammad. Islamic manuscript illuminations are the inspiration for several patterns, including candles and snowflake-like designs. The leftover loaves and fishes from the feeding of the 5,000 appear in Native American baskets. A cosmic mandala image from the Buddhist tradition appears in several places. Visual representations of chants from Native American, Muslim, Taoist and other traditions are the basis for illuminations of the Psalms. The varying pitch of the chants is rendered graphically to provide a motif for the abstract illumination.

The illuminations themselves are complex exercises in biblical exegesis that send us back to the words with fresh eyes. In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are depicted as Africans—which science tells us they were. Jackson declared that he wanted to make Eve "sparky—"someone you might want to get into trouble for"—and indeed she is. Sin is exciting, but not more beautiful than creation.

The parable of the sower depicts Jesus casting seed not only on the four types of soil, but all across the page, suggesting there are seeds throughout this text waiting to take root in the soul of the reader. St. Paul is shown surrounded not only by images from the stories in Acts, such as his Jewish prayer shawl and a ship, but also by church buildings from all ages, including the dome of St. Peter's Basilica.

Flora and fauna and insects from Minnesota and from Wales (home of Jackson's scriptorium) also appear, locating this Bible in the places of its production. Poisonous insects native to Minnesota are shown beside passages on Eden and Jesus' baptism, announcing encroaching danger. As the prodigal son flees a life of degradation, there is an image of the Twin Towers burning in the background—as if to say: only reconciliation overcomes violence. The picture of the multitude on whom the Holy Spirit descends at Pentecost was modeled on the crowd at a St. John's University football game! The abbey church appears in the background of that page—a direct descendant of that first church in Jerusalem.

Calderhead's book and the Minneapolis exhibition take pains to distinguish between an illumination and an illustration. *Illumination* refers etymologically to light playing on gold. The gold leaf is meant, quite literally, to throw light upon the words that surround it and, in doing so, cause us to read these words more deeply.

Theologically, gold is an image for God, and so it appears in the thin line that separates creation's chaos into light and dark, and in the blast of light that flames from the incarnate Word in John 1.

The light flashes off the gold more dramatically in the handmade version than in the facsimile edition. In the trade volume, Jesus on the cross looks merely like a gold streak. Viewing the original, one can see that the figure on the cross is made entirely in gold relief, down to each detail. The "special treatments" of certain texts, such as the first and last psalms and the *Magnificat*, literally rise from the page and fill the viewer's field of vision. This is more than an exhibition of beautiful art, though of course it is that. It is closer to liturgy, as the pages flash, and praise is almost demanded of the viewer, who sees long-loved words shining anew.

Every psalm page features a small gold image that graphically renders the chanting of the monks from St. John's Abbey. We are constantly reminded as we read that the psalms are to be sung in church—and that in such singing God is present.

Only occasionally is a verse from one part of scripture used to illuminate another. In the only clear case of a specifically Christian reading being given to an Old Testament text, the first chapter of Genesis features Paul's words about the glory of a transformed creation from 2 Corinthians in the margin. John's prologue is illumined with the words from Colossians 1 about Jesus being the "image of the invisible God." Jesus' injunction to the apostles to be his witnesses "to the ends of the earth" accompanies not Acts 1 but Acts 28, appropriately leaving these words as the conclusion to that most missional of biblical books.

The grandeur of the SJB is made all the more striking by the presence of the occasional mistake. Even a master calligrapher's eyes will slip occasionally in transcribing thousands of lines. (Drawing a single page, with two columns of text, makes for a full day's work.) The calligraphers' solutions are themselves delightful. For example, one of the birds that gobbles seed in Mark 4 flies off to "rescue" a missed line and add it to the text.

Some might ask: Is it not extravagant to spend such effort and money on a book? Might not such an expenditure be better used to care for the poor—a longstanding commitment of the Benedictine order?

John Klassen, O.S.B., abbot of St. John's, in conversation with Calderhead, pointed specifically to love of the poor as a reason *for* the project. "God's commitment to the

poor is embedded in scripture. . . . The deeper we are drawn into scripture, the more we will be driven to address these issues in our lives." Indeed, the texts that highlight God's preferential option for the poor—from the instructions for a just economy in Leviticus to Jesus' feeding and healing of outcasts—are often selected for special treatment.

Jackson points to the preciousness of the biblical words themselves as reason for such extravagance. In *The Illuminator*, a video about the making of the SJB and about Jackson's life, he says, "When you really mean something . . . you don't type it out on a piece of paper, you ask somebody like me to put these words in such a form that it looks as if you really mean what you're saying." Father Eric Hollas, O.S.B., of St. John's University pointed to the enduring legacy of the SJB: "I would like it to be known as a project that people went out on a limb to pursue, that was so out of the ordinary . . . that people would no longer ask 'why are you doing it,' but 'why didn't someone do this before?'"

The elaborate care taken with the words of scripture speaks prophetically to an age that cares little about the wisdom borne by ancient texts—and about craftsmanship generally. Universities, corporations and governments spend similar sums daily on all manner of ugliness. In one corner of the world, a monastery is creating something of wondrous beauty meant to last, and worthy to last, for hundreds of years.

For centuries art and scripture were intertwined in the church, not only in the production of illuminated manuscripts but in the making of buildings, statuary and drama. Since the Reformation, Protestants have zealously printed and guarded the text of scripture, and in their more iconoclastic traditions they have eschewed the use of images. Catholics, for their part, have maintained a tradition of ecclesially shaped art, but often without rigorous attention to the words of scripture. The result of this division has been stacks of ugly and unread Bibles, and art so distanced from holiness as to evoke despair of any search for beauty or truth. In the St. John's Bible one sees a Protestant care for words and a Catholic care for ecclesial art sewn back together. This surprising, almost miraculous reunification may spark a renewed attention to art and to ways of living shaped by these words. Such attention would indeed be a fitting way to mark the birth of the Image of God.