2018

The Social Conscience of The Saint John's Bible (Chapter Nine of The Saint John's Bible and Its Tradition: Illuminating Beauty in the Twenty-First Century)

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9

The Social Conscience of *The Saint John's Bible*

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One of the amazing features of the striking new artwork in *The Saint John's Bible* is the way that so many of its images capture the social concerns of biblical texts in ways that speak to twenty-first-century issues in gripping and prophetic ways. Especially powerful are the ways the artwork in these seven volumes addresses issues related to women, ecology, globalization, violence, poverty, wellbeing, healing, and redemption. As historic artistic contributions to society in the new millennium, many of its 160 pieces of art thus speak powerfully to contemporary issues in ways that convey timeless truths in timely ways. Tolstoy described the highest value of great art as its religious or spiritual power to speak to the issues of the day, and that being the case, the new artwork in these seven volumes are destined to be classics from the start. In that sense, the social conscience of *The Saint John's Bible* speaks powerfully, engaging culture with prophetic confrontation and spiritual illumination.[1]

1. For a helpful guide to the background of each of the artistic pieces in *The Saint John's Bible*, see Susan Sink, *The Art of* The Saint John's Bible; for a guide to the process behind the project, see Christopher Calderhead, *Illuminating the Word: The Making of* The Saint John's Bible. Earlier drafts of these essays were posted on my *Huffington Post* page in 2015–2016: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/author/panderso-792, and the final three essays below are subtitled "The Social Conscience of *The Saint John's Bible* I, II, and III."

"A Mission of Love"—Seven Features over Seven Days

Rather than focus on one or two paintings in particular, this essay will comment on several key paintings, beginning with seven paintings that were featured daily in "A Mission of Love" to America, led by Pope Francis, September 21–27, 2015. In what was designed to celebrate the historic mission of Pope Francis to America, the leaders of the Saint John's University and Abby in Minnesota selected seven pieces of art in Volumes 1 and 6, and over sixty Churches, Colleges, and Universities around the nation featured these texts and their artwork daily in their local settings. A high point of the week involved the giving an Apostles Edition of *The Saint John's Bible* to the Library of Congress on September 24th, celebrated by Pope Francis and leaders of Congress.

In an era where "cultured despisers of religion" fail to note the power and feeling of authentic faith and practice, the mission of Pope Francis to America came at a pivotal moment in world history.[2] As the first Pope of the Americas, his mission to Cuba and the United States called for justice, reconciliation, and grace. His "Mission of Love" embraced the poor, prisoners, and even members of Congress and the White House. As media covered these events, a new day of appreciation for what it means to embrace the way of Jesus touched the hearts and conscience of the nation, focusing on illuminated texts and images from *The Saint John's Bible,* ranging from *Creation* to *Pentecost.* A particular painting and text was featured each day that week:

- Monday (9/21) *Creation* (*Pentateuch,* Vol. 1—Genesis 1:1—2:4a)
- Tuesday (9/22) *Abraham and Sarah* (*Pentateuch,* Vol. 1—Genesis 15:1–7; 17:1–22)
- Wednesday (9/23) *Ten Commandments* (*Pentateuch,* Vol. 1—Exodus 20:1–26)
- Thursday (9/24) *Peter's Confession* (*Gospels & Acts,* Vol. 6—Matthew 16:13–23)
- Friday (9/25) *Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes* (*Gospels & Acts,* Vol. 6—Mark 6:33–44; 8:1–10)
- Saturday (9/26) *Two Cures* (*Gospels & Acts,* Vol. 6—Mark 5:25–43)

2. A term coined by Friedrich Schleiermacher two centuries ago, critiquing the prevailing ethos of Europe during his day, the thrust is still relevant today; see *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers.*

- Sunday (9/27) *Pentecost* (*Gospels & Acts*, Vol. 6—Acts 1:6–11, 2:1–47)

Creation: Illuminating the Cosmos

As the frontispiece of Volume 1 of *The Saint John's Bible*, Donald Jackson's beautiful painting of *Creation* sets the stage for the entire seven-volume set (see Figure 1, *Creation*). God is the Ground and Source of our being, and at the end of each creative work, "God saw that it was good." Striking against the ancient view that order is achieved through violence and domination, the God of the Hebrews creates and orders the cosmos simply and powerfully by his word. Humans are also created in the divine image, and they are invited into partnership with God in caring for and cultivating the earth. On the seventh day God rested, and in her "Reflection on Creation," Barbara Sutton invites us to consider how to create the space to honor and worship the Creator amidst the business of life.[3]

As the viewer embraces the first piece of art in this amazing collection, the seven days of creation are outlined in seven columns, elucidating each of the seven days mentioned in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Before the first day, the cosmos was "a formless void" (*tohu wabohu* in the Hebrew language), characterizing the chaos into which God declared, "Let there be light!" A thin ribbon of gold marks the transition from darkness to illumination on that first day. The second day marks the expanse of sky above the waters, and the third day marks the separation of the waters and the land, allowing vegetation to grow. An image of the Ganges River and Delta in India is featured here, which, with its tendencies to flood during monsoon seasons, reminds us of the importance of that separation. Day four features the sun and the moon, ruling day and night and seasons, and teeming creatures of the sea are created on the fifth day. On the sixth day, land animals are created, and humans are here depicted, patterned after aboriginal cave-art drawings of Australia. Here, the female is the hunter, and the coral snake is shown at the bottom of the column, prefiguring the second creation narrative in Genesis 2 and 3. After looking over the creation of humans, "God saw that it was very good!"

On the seventh day God rested, and this column is presented as golden—conveying the fullness of divine presence. If the Creator God was able to rest on the seventh day, so are all of God's children invited into that weekly rest and worship. In ascending number, small squares of embossed

3. Sutton, "Illuminating the Mission: A Reflection on Creation."

gold rise from each of the days in Donald Jackson's painting, until the seventh day concludes with seven markers of illumination, typifying the divine presence. We live in a world where constant activity is too often the norm. We run from one event to another, arriving at a new place before our minds and hearts are able to let go of what we were doing or where we were. We pass through life and do not allow ourselves to experience deeply or to be touched by other people. We are in need of soul-searching. We must learn to embrace again love, compassion, and honor for the healing and cultivation of the earth. Embracing the light of the divine presence and restoring harmony to creation become the hallmarks of God's Sabbath rest into which all of humanity is welcomed.

The seven days of creation featured in this painting are also repeated in other artwork throughout the seven volumes, introducing a bit of interfluentiality. In "Garden of Eden" the seven days of creation are featured at the top of the painting, showing how God's creative work flows down into the paradisal garden, even into its fallen state. A second replaying of the seven days is featured in the first and second of the four panels in *Creation, Covenant, Shekinah, Kingdom*, expanding on chapters 10–11 of the deuterocanonical Wisdom of Solomon. Echoing Proverbs 8:22–31, God's wisdom is seen as not only playing a role in the creation of the world, but it also was instrumental in the redemptive history of the people of Israel. The *Covenant* panel then features a white dove bearing an olive branch, echoing the black raven flying across the seven days of creation, introducing the promise of peace to the message-bearing work of the raven. The *Fulfillment of Creation* in Romans 8 also references this image, reminding us that creation has been groaning for the revelation of the adopted children of God, and that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (see Figure 13, *Fulfillment of Creation*). From the beginning of time to the present day, God's creative-redemptive work not only reminds us whence we've come; it also directs our paths toward a hopeful future.

If the seven days of creation inspire reflection on God's handiwork and love for the world, focusing on the artwork of *The Saint John's Bible* can inspire an embrace of the mission of love that is celebrated today. In addition to being heard, sometimes the Word of God deserves to be seen. After all, it is not only the embossed gold and platinum leaf on the artwork of the page that represents the divine presence, but wherever God's truth and love are conveyed and received, illumination genuinely

happens . . . in our lives. That is a reality worth celebrating and embracing; indeed, it is Good News for the world!

Abraham and Sarah: The Blessing of the World

God makes several promises of blessing to Abraham in Genesis 12–17, and these also involve Sarah, extending further to the world. The opening promise in Genesis 12:1–3 involves leaving the familiarity of home and traveling to an unknown land to be shown later. That must have taken courage! Another promise follows in 15:1–6, where despite Abraham's childlessness, God promises to multiply his descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky. That must have taken faith! Yet another promise, in 17:1–22, affirms that Abraham will be the father of many, and the children of both Sarah and Hagar—Isaac and Ishmael—also become the fathers of great nations. That must have involved perseverance!

In this painting by Donald Jackson, the Jewish Menorah[4] is used to anticipate the ways the families of Abraham will be a blessing to the world. From Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to the twelve tribes of Israel and beyond, the family lines of Abraham are set against the innumerable stars of the heavens—reminiscent of outer space photographs taken by the Hubble Telescope. The image of the Menorah is also replicated in depictions elsewhere of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, and it becomes the main feature of the frontispiece of Volume 6, *Gospels and Acts.* In what is the most famous of *The Saint John's Bible* artwork, the Jewish Menorah reflects upon the lineage of Jesus going back to Abraham and Sarah. As a twenty-first-century piece of art, double-helix strands of DNA ornament the candlesticks, set against the firmament of God's creative work. At the bottom right of this painting, the names of Hagar and Ishmael (father of the Arabic nations) are mentioned, and Hagar's name is written in Arabic as well as Hebrew and English. It truly is an interfaith rendering of the Abrahamic promise.

Central to Scripture, thus, is the promise that the children of Abraham will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The land and the people groups are means to that end, not the end in themselves, and nearly half the world's population is included in the larger families of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, therein lies the challenge. Can the families of Abraham really be a blessing to the world instead of a curse? The answer to that question will depend on how the followers of Abraham's God embody

4. A seven-fold candlestick; Exodus 25:31–40.

his love, hospitality, and grace. And, the fulfillment of that promise in the long run hinges upon our courage and faithfulness in the here and now.

Ten Commandments: A Covenant of Love

The Ten Commandments, given to Moses by God for the children of Israel to follow, are not primarily religious. Their concern is largely societal, rooted in love and right living, and all of them are relational in their thrust. The first four Commandments address the human-divine relationship; the remaining six address human-to-human relationships.[5] In this painting by Thomas Ingmire, the various letters of "the ten words" fall from the upper areas of the painting to the lower ones, affecting human realities as they do so (see Figure 2, *Ten Commandments*).

They also move from gold letters and colored images to black and white, reminding us how easy it is for the living Word of God to become reduced to codes of law. And yet, at the top of the painting are four scenarios, reminding readers of momentous events in Israel's salvation history: the burning bush, the first Passover, the sea crossing, and the twelve pillars erected at Mount Sinai. If God was faithful in the past, God can also be trusted for the future.

Within ancient history, though, these calls to covenant faithfulness are not unique. While the codes of Moses and their stipulations in Exodus 20–24 deal with general principles and particular applications for the Children of Israel to follow, the codes of the Babylonian King, Hammurabi—centuries earlier, in modern-day Iraq—also addressed over two hundred right ways of being and doing. In the last painting in Volume 1, Moses is presented as looking into the Promised Land, although he is not allowed to enter.[6] In *Death of Moses*, three artists combine their work to make this piece poignant and powerful. Aidan Hart renders the wistful face of Moses in iconographic form—touching the emotions of the viewer. Donald Jackson portrays the Promised Land and future captivity in Babylon, where the books of Moses were finalized. Thomas Ingmire, though, echoes the earlier Ten Commandments painting in his word-art form, showing Moses clutching the tablets whose standards would impact the legal enterprises and societal values of western civilization for millennia to come.

5. Exodus 20:1–16.

6. Deuteronomy 34:1–12.

Throughout the rest of Hebrew Scripture, the Law of Moses is featured centrally as a standard of societal justice, right living, and authentic faith. The Prophets call people to live by the just and honest ways of the Law, and the Priests call people to render fitting sacrifices to the Lord who delivers them and redeems the land. The Laws of Moses were also central to the teachings of Jesus over a thousand years later, as the love of God and the love of neighbor are summarized as the radical heart of the Ten Commandments. In Volume 6 of *The Saint John's Bible,* the double commandments of Jesus are featured in the margins of the first three Gospels.[7] Here Jesus cites Deuteronomy 6:4–5 (the *Shema*—"Hear, Oh Israel . . .") and Leviticus 19:34 as the heart of the Law, emphasizing supremely the love of God and neighbor as the heart of God's best practices for humanity.

Indeed, things do go better when people embrace respectfully the Ground and Source of our Being, and when they love and respect others as they themselves would wish to be treated. However, following the ways of God is not a transaction, like a contract. Rather, faithfulness to the divine Word involves a loving response to the ways of being and doing disclosed by a loving God. Indeed, authenticity, reverence, humility, hospitality, nonviolence, faithfulness, honesty, integrity, and dependability have their own rewards, and all of humanity is invited to embrace these values—that things might be well for all of God's children. And, if people would live by these values, how much better off the entire world would be! In that sense, God's ways are offered to humanity as an extension of God's love, and in their embrace, that love and our love for others, are actualized.

Peter's Confession: The Foundational Rock of the Church

Peter's confession in the Gospels marks the turning point in Jesus' ministry. In Mark and Matthew, the setting is Caesarea Philippi—the headwaters of the Jordan River, where a cave descends deep into the earth.[8] On this site at the base of Mount Hermon, conquering foreign armies erected shrines to their pagan gods, claiming the land for their empires. A visitor cannot escape viewing the deep cave on that site, and one can imagine the gates of *Sheol,* or the gateway to the underworld would have been associated with that site contextually. For Jesus to ask, "Who do you say that I am?" in that setting poses a test to his followers. To confess him before

7. Matthew 22:37–40; Mark 12:29–31; Luke 10:27.

8. Mark 8:27–30; Matthew 16:13–19.

competing faiths and powers may indeed exact a price for the believer, as the gift of life inevitably involves the way of the cross.

This striking painting by Donald Jackson features three presentations—something of a triptych. On the right side is a cubist rendering of Peter, the "rock" of the church, reflecting a bit of humor among the designers and artists. In the middle is an image of Jesus, adorned with illuminative gold leaf, signifying the divine presence. Within his halo, however, is the shape of the cross, as a reminder of the cost of his own faithfulness in his mission. To the left is an image of a conquering horse, reminiscent of warring invaders across the centuries. As a means of giving the gates of *Sheol* a contemporary feel, however, the artists have introduced a microscopic image of the AIDS virus at the center of that image. Can there be any more poignant association of suffering and torment among present-day readers of the Bible? And yet, the promise of Christ is that these threats would not prevail, as the power of Christ transcends all adversity.

After Peter's confessing Jesus to be the Christ in the Synoptics, Jesus warns that the Son of Man must suffer and die—to which his followers object. Before Peter's confessing Jesus as the Holy One of God in John, Jesus calls for ingesting the flesh and blood of the suffering Son of Man—at which even some of his disciples abandon him and walk with him no longer.[9] Whether the rock upon which the church stands is the legacy of Peter, the truth of his confession, or its revelatory origin, Jesus reminds us in Matthew 7 that the solid rock upon which to build is faithfully following Jesus. While the cost of discipleship may be dear, the gift of life is always worthy. In the words of the 19-year-old Quaker martyr, James Parnell a few months before his death, "Be willing that self shall suffer for truth, not the truth for self." Against such a foundational rock, the gates of Hades will never prevail.

Loaves and Fishes: An Invitation into Partnership

The only miracle of Jesus in all four Gospels is the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes, and Mark and Matthew even include the feeding of the 4,000 as well as the feeding of the 5,000.[10] While Jesus multiplies the loaves and the fishes, his disciples are charged with distributing them to those who are hungry. They also gather up the fragments, so that nothing should be

9. John 6:51–69.

10. Matthew 14:13–21; 15:32–39; Mark 6:30–44; 8:1–10; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–15.

wasted. In feeding the hungry of the world, God provides bounty beyond imagination, but he also invites us into partnership. In John 6, a young boy plays a role in the feeding; he offers his lunch for the to Lord transform and multiply in meeting the world's needs. Can we do any less?

When the designers of *The Saint John's Bible* first laid out the text and the artwork, they had allotted a quarter page for the feeding stories. However, when Donald Jackson thought about the surplus of meaning, as well as the surplus of pieces gathered up in the seven and the twelve baskets, he redesigned the pages around Mark 6 and filled both pages with a proliferation of images.[11] Drawing in the Byzantine mosaic from the floor of the Tabgha Church of the Multiplication on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, the loaves-and-fishes motif surrounds the artwork on these pages. As the Bible speaks of sins of commission and omission, black and white bars are featured in this artwork, reminding us of things we have done and not done in failing the Lord in partnership with him in the feeding of the world.

As people around the world pray for their daily bread, can his followers play a role in those prayers being answered? If the earth could grow and multiply enough food to feed the world, can Jesus' followers find a way to distribute it so that today's multitudes are also fed? We are reminded of such a calling by "A Mission of Love"—the theme of Pope Francis' visit to America—and embracing these texts and artwork inspires its fulfillment.

Two Cures: The Healing of the World

Jesus proclaimed, "The Kingdom of God is at hand!" He delivered the inwardly afflicted and healed the sick. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus heals lepers, the lame, the blind, and those suffering from other ailments, furthering God's redemptive work in the world. Those touched by the healing hand of Jesus include women: the mother-in-law of Peter, the daughter of Jairus—the Synagogue leader, and the woman with an issue of blood. In Mark 5:25–34, on the way to attending the dying daughter of Jairus, a woman with an incurable bleeding problem touched Jesus and was healed. He felt the power going out of him. After arriving at the home of the sick girl—now reportedly dead, Jesus took her by the hand and declared, *Talitha koum* (Aramaic for "little girl, arise"), which is added to the artwork. She arose, and all were astonished.

11. Sink, *The Art of The Saint John's Bible*, 234–35.

In the painting of three scenes from Mark 5, the iconographic style of Adrian Hart here sketches the healing of women in the earliest of the gospels. These three panels are vertically arranged, framed by a border. God's work is sometimes performed as a surprise, along the way to another healing. Whether Jesus is touched or is the one taking the hand of the other, he declares that human faith is a factor in the work of healing. "Your faith has made you well," declares the Markan Jesus. The artists have also added a theme reminiscent of *Elisha and the Six Miracles* in 2 Kings 4–6, "Do not fear; only believe!"

The ministry of Jesus to women is featured again by Adrian Hart, Donald Jackson, and Sally Mae Johnson in their two-panel artwork on the *Woman Taken in Adultery* from John 7:53—8:11. In this iconographic style, the first panel portrays the shaming of the woman in the temple area, where the Law of Moses is being used as a weapon, along with stones. In the second panel, her accusers are gone, the stones are on the ground, and the veil in the temple is drawn, availing access to the divine presence for all. Here we see the move from the woman's desolation to consolation in the liberating ministry of Christ. In sending out his followers to preach, liberate, and heal, Jesus also extends his ministry to the rest of the world in partnership with his friends. And, in so doing, we are all reminded that we exist not for ourselves, but for the healing of the world.

Pentecost: The Empowerment of the Spirit

As Jesus' followers gathered on Pentecost Sunday, 50 days after the Sabbath following his crucifixion, they were startled by rushing winds and tongues of fire. Travelers had come to Jerusalem from all parts of the known world, but an even more amazing thing happened. Despite representing diverse language groups, people were enabled to speak in and to understand unknown languages. Donald Jackson's artwork depicting Pentecost in *The Saint John's Bible* builds knowing connections with that world-changing event two millennia ago and the grounded situation of Saint John's University and Abby[12] (see Figure 12, *Pentecost*).

In addition to wind, fire, and the illuminated presence of the Holy Spirit, details of the Saint John's Abbey Church are featured, connecting the beginning of the church with its continued vitality. With a bit of artistic license, the enthusiasm of a Saint John's University football game is featured

12. Sink, *The Art of The Saint John's Bible*, 272–74.

at the bottom of the painting, connecting the school spirit of a great athletic tradition with the original Pentecost.

Reported in Acts 2 as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the event resembles a reversal of the language-confusion inflicted upon arrogant king Nimrod and builders of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. Then Peter stood and preached, declaring this to be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel 2:28–32. In the last days, God's Spirit would be poured out on young and old, on men and women, on leaders and servants; those calling upon the name of the Lord would be saved. The response to that world-changing event was impressive! Those responding to the gospel that day numbered 3,000, marking the beginning of the church, and he invited them to be baptized.

In addition to receiving visions of how things ought to be, believers met together for table fellowship, worship, and the teaching of the apostles. They pooled their resources together into a commonwealth, and the needs of all were addressed. When the Holy Spirit is poured out upon humanity, lives change. Not only does empathy and understanding prevail among diverse people groups, but believers also share what they have with those in need. In the outpouring of the Spirit, the blessings of Abraham are extended to all peoples, and the visionary prophecy of Joel is fulfilled.

Ethiopian Lives Matter

Do people share a common humanity, and if so, what is its character? Whereas Genesis 1:1–2:4a calls for setting aside time for worship, renewal, and relationships on a weekly basis, the next two chapters address our shared humanity. Despite being created in the divine image, humans are also fallen. And yet, the rest of the biblical story shows a God who seeks to restore broken relationships, to bring justice to the world, and to welcome God's children into this healing-redeeming work. Two highly suggestive paintings of *The Saint John's Bible* engage the social conscience of today's readers and viewers powerfully, as *Garden of Eden* displays both the beauty and the dangers of the paradisal garden, and *Adam and Eve* presents a cross-cultural image of the originative human couple.

In *Garden of Eden*, Donald Jackson and Chris Tomlin portray graphically the goodness and the perils of the Garden. A beautiful macaw of Colombia and Central America overlooks the scene, with prehistoric cave-art figures playing musical instruments and carrying out life's tasks forms the

background. At the bottom of the painting, the poisonous-though-beautiful harlequin shrimp reminds us of beauty and danger conjoined; we can be deceived by beauty as well as blessed by it. Tomlin's marginal sketch of the Welsh thistle, on which a lovely butterfly has lighted, likewise conveys the message of the mingled pain and glories of the created world. In the first three paintings, Tomlin has also added the beautiful coral snake—the most beautiful and poisonous of serpents—representing the tempter in the Garden. Echoed also in *Woman and the Dragon*,[13] the final defeat of the serpent prophesied in Genesis 3:15 is signaled by its being severed in the *Adam and Eve* painting, extending hope to humanity, even amidst its trials and temptations.

Adam and Eve: Ethiopian Lives Matter

From the muddy stuff of the earth is humankind formed ("*adam*"—human—is formed from "*adamah*"—clay), and to dusty decomposition shall humans return.[14] Note also that from the beginning, diversity and mutuality are central to the creation of man and woman. While the mother of the living (Eve) is created as a counterpart to the man (Adam), she is also formed out of his side, emphasizing partnership within diversity.[15] This mutuality is displayed in the renderings of *Garden of Eden* and *Adam and Eve* in *The Saint John's Bible*, as the beauty and dangers of the Garden are confronted together by the originative couple, their faces placed side-by-side. Against the backdrop of a platinum-embossed mirror, the viewer also sees one's own reflection, inviting a sense of personal connection with the biblical pair.

Ironically, though, Bible readers often view these historic figures through the lenses of their own cultures, when they are meant to be seen as typological representatives of full humanity—literally. And, in European-Americans' envisioning Adam and Eve as a Caucasian couple, as most groups see them through the lens of their own heredity, we too easily miss the global thrust of these primordial figures. As a correction to these blinders, the social conscience of *The Saint John's Bible* offers us a new and liberating perspective. Rather than presenting Adam and Eve as a northern European couple, they are rendered as members of the Karo tribe

13. Revelation 12.

14. Genesis 2:7; 3:19

15. Genesis 2:21–3:21.

of southwest Ethiopia. And, if our genetic-tracing technologies are correct in identifying Africa as the source of human origins, there may be an anthropological basis for this connection. Additionally, the border for this painting is constructed of indigenous tapestry designs from the Peruvian highlands, effectively globalizing our understandings of Adam and Eve.

I recently heard a story of an elementary-age boy, who upon seeing this painting of *The Saint John's Bible* a couple of years ago, found tears welling up in his eyes. When someone asked him what he was feeling, he said, "I've never seen myself in the Bible before." He was African-American. While humans were created in the divine image, the fall of humanity is also real, according to Genesis 2–3. This accounts for human capacity for good, as well as humans' afflictions with toil, pain, and social brokenness. And yet, Adam's and Eve's expulsion from the garden of paradise and its fruitfulness raises the question for every generation: How can we get back into that place of ecological harmony and of right relationship with God, with one another, and within ourselves?

In the seventeenth century, George Fox received a vision of entering through the flaming sword back into the place where Adam was before he fell—a gift of God's grace, through the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.[16] In the twentieth century, Martin Luther King, Jr. had a dream of a day when all humanity would be embraced, judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. And, these are visions worth embracing today! In seeing ourselves in the creation of the first humans—in Ethiopian perspective—perhaps a new sense of righteousness and justice might yet emerge. The Bible was not written in North America; it was written in the Middle East, at the intersection of three continents, challenging provincial perspectives, both then and now. Aided by the social conscience of *The Saint John's Bible*, not only do Ethiopian lives matter, but the lives of all God's children matter, in every age and in every setting.

On Syrian Refugees and the Reversals of Christmas

Pleasant images of nativity scenes adorn hearth and home during Christmas and Advent seasons, but when we stop and take a closer look, our perspectives often change. Upon a closer look, that momentous sojourn in the Levant was more difficult than we might have thought. An unwed pregnant teenager; a forced return to an immigrant's homeland for "tax-registration"

16. Roberts, *Through Flaming Sword.*

purposes; the dislocation of the displaced; the weariness of homeless travelers—this was not a sightseeing excursion! Like Syrian refuges resulting from recent conflicts, and as the followers of the Son of Man would later find, they had no place to lay their heads.

And yet, Luke's story of the birth of Jesus bolsters hope for humanity, not because it offers cookies to midnight visitors or gifts to "nice" children, but because it challenges the bondage of worldly domination and the leveraging of uneven justice. In its graphic presentation of *The Birth of Christ*, the striking artwork of *The Saint John's Bible* exposes several reversals, which pique the social conscience of the modern viewer while also illuminating authentic meanings in the biblical Christmas story.

Birth of Christ: Reversals Then and Now

In the powerful frontispiece of the Gospel of Luke, Donald Jackson notes several reversals that challenge our staid notions of the birth of Jesus on various levels. First, rather than focusing on a baby in a manger, this painting features the manger as an altar table echoed in the painting of the *Life in Community* of the Apostles in Acts 4. The vertical light-beam from heaven, intersected by the illuminating angels, forms the shape of a cross—founded upon the altar/manger as its base. The ram among the animals (echoed in other paintings of Passover sacrifice) brings home the point that the birth of the Christ-child signals his sacrifice on the cross—a poignant destiny, indeed.

Another colorful feature of this painting highlights the images of those coming to see the Christ-child. Mary, Joseph, and the baby are somewhat diminished in their presentation, but the most vivid focus is upon those who have come to see. And, while the biblical text has no mention of a donkey, its inclusion here prefigures Jesus' riding into Jerusalem later, at the end of his ministry, not on a conquering white stallion, but on the humble colt of a donkey. Therefore, a societal reversal is apparent in God's glory being revealed to the humble and lowly—the dispossessed of the land. These are those on whom God's favor is shown.

Speaking of animals, the ox here featured resembles the Neolithic cave art, discovered in Lascaux, France, several decades ago. Thus, even the animals in the manger scene represent a multiplicity of cultures, periods, and associations. This leads into a text quoted from Zechariah's prophecy, that God's tender mercy will "give light to those who sit in darkness in the

shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."[17] The good news of God's saving-revealing work transcends the boundaries of time, place, and culture—bringing liberation to all by the power of grace and truth.

The final irony of this painting, and the biblical text behind it, is that it challenges the political power of Empire and domination with a chorus of angels delivered to lowly shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"[18] A God who favors the lowly and dispossessed of the land is the God revealed in Luke's birth story—not a projected deity who honors the lords of merchandise, prominence, or power. This message of hope to the lowly and the downtrodden reminds us all of the first priorities of the God revealed in the Christmas story. Love, peace, and light are what the birth of Jesus heralds, and that good news is what this season is all about.

As we consider Syrian travelers and refugees today, as well as the dispossessed of the land across our time-torn world, we cannot help but be reminded of parallels with Mary and Joseph and their difficult situation twenty-one centuries ago. The thrust of Luke's account is not the establishment of one group over another, but a witness to the mercy and grace of God—embracing the downcast and aliens among us, providing refuge and hope for the dispossessed. Sometimes it takes a revelation from on high for our time-bound sensibilities to be reversed, and now as much as ever, we are still in need of the illuminating "dawn of light from on high" to break upon us, by the tender mercy of God.

And, if that happens, we might yet catch a glimpse of the true meaning of the season in ways beyond what we'd imagined. After all, if God's redemptive work privileged dispossessed aliens on the road in years past, might we find ways of yet being open to such reversals in the present? If so, perhaps that would be the greatest reversal of all; merry Christmas!

On Prodigals, Forgiveness, and Honoring 9/11

The Bible is not a safe book! It confronts, disturbs, and challenges as well as being comforting, instructive, and convicting. As arguably the most impactful book in human history, it continues to speak to contemporary audiences—often in ways that surprise us—today and across the centuries. In the early ninth century, the *Book of Kells*, the most famous of

17. Luke 1:79.

18. Luke 2:14.

ancient illuminated Bibles, was produced by Irish monks. They adorned the hand-lettered text of Scripture with hundreds of images and artistic additions, connecting biblical themes with real-life issues. In Michelangelo's day, the Ceiling of the Sistine Chapel rendered in artistic form the highlights of biblical themes in prophetic voice and with creative genius. Now, in the twenty-first century, as the first Benedictine-commissioned illuminated Bible in five and a half centuries has been completed, an artistic and spiritual contribution of similar magnitude and importance to these other great works has been produced. And that work speaks today in ways powerful and convicting.

In addition to the beauty of the calligraphy and the artwork of *The Saint John's Bible*, however, its global impact hinges upon the ways it addresses contemporary issues with a sense of biblical social conscience. Given that the artists have sought to connect the timeless biblical texts with timely issues of the twenty-first century, the engineers of the project have followed the lead of previous masterpieces. Among the most instructive paintings is the *Luke Anthology*, contributed by several artists: Donald Jackson, Sally Mae Joseph and Aidan Hart (see Figure 8, *Luke Anthology*). This painting features key parables in the Gospel of Luke: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Lost Son, The Good Samaritan, and Lazarus and Dives, and these representations speak to the social conscience of audiences in three special ways.[19]

Luke Anthology: An Invitation to Forgive

First, in the lower right-hand corner of the painting, the story of poor Lazarus and wealthy Dives is sketched in lucid, provocative ways. As the story goes in Luke 16:19–31, the fortunes of the poor man and the rich man are reversed in the afterlife. Whereas poor Lazarus was hungry and covered with sores in this life, in the next he is comforted in the embrace of Abraham. Whereas the rich man, Dives, had it good in the present life, in the next he is tormented and thirsty, pleading for relief from Lazarus. This is denied, as is the rich man's plea that someone go and warn his five brothers. If they have not heeded the way of Moses and message of the prophets,

19. Sink, *The Art of The Saint John's Bible*, 250–53. In addition to being posted on 9/11 in 2015, it was also posted on Krista Tippett's *On Being* web blog on September 27th, 2015 as "Illuminating the Social Conscience of the Bible's Challenge to Forgive," https://onbeing.org/blog/illuminating-the-social-conscience-of-the-bibles-challenge-to-forgive.

why would a warning from beyond the grave make any difference now? Note how the torment of the rich man, Dives, is illustrated powerfully in this painting, as is the comforting of poor Lazarus in the embrace of father Abraham. If this is what the next world will be like, how might that impact our social awareness and concern in the present?

Second, The Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37 is referenced, but no images of it are used. Only four sentences are displayed, concluding with a question: "A priest passed by on the other side." "A Levite passed by on the other side." "But a Samaritan was moved to pity and bandaged his wounds." "Which one of these was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?" In looking at this progression, moving diagonally from left to right and bottom to top, it is interesting that no images of people are used. The viewer is thus deprived of limiting any of the characters to a single conception. Priest, Levite, or any other leader, all who neglect the man in need fall short of their neighborly duty. And, whether the helper is a Samaritan or a person of any other ethnic or religious identity, those who show mercy are commended for their neighborly example. Thus, the parable continues to speak as we think about what it means to be an exemplary neighbor within and beyond society's borders.

The third impact of the painting draws together the three parables of Luke 15 in three sketches. With angels hovering around them, a number of hollow coins are accompanied by a silver coin—the one the widow searched for and finally found. And, the lost sheep, sought by the shepherd, stands out against a dark background. The most graphic parable, though, is that of The Prodigal Son. Here the son moves from the pigs he had been reduced to feeding to the embrace of the loving father, whose gracious welcome was undeserved. A coat of many colors is unfurled as a flag, and the story features beautifully the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation. However, as the eye moves diagonally from left to right and from bottom to top, the forgiveness theme makes an abrupt and provocative move. With the application of gold-leaf foil in the form of two Twin Towers, the forgiveness theme strikes home, causing this viewer to swallow hard.

Receiving home a wasteful and ungrateful child is one thing, but for individuals or groups to extend grace following the most murderous terrorist act—the most egregious foreign assault on American soil in our nation's history, save, perhaps Pearl Harbor—poses a prophetic challenge. So, how do we honor the memory of 9/11 without contributing to further atrocities as agents of God's redeeming work? Such is the pointed question *The Saint*

John's Bible raises for its viewers today. Can we find ways to forgive and to love our enemies, especially when the injuries have been severe? That would involve a miracle of grace, but it also might pave the way for miracles of healing and reconciliation in the future, in ways I have not yet imagined. Again, the Bible has never been a safe book; it meddles, confronts, cajoles, and challenges; and yet, it also speaks in ways potentially transformative if we are open to the truth. And, in the hands of Donald Jackson and his associates, the social conscience of this amazing work continues to speak in ways prophetic—on the eleventh of September, and *always*.

Concluding Reflections

As in the day of Friedrich Schleiermacher's Germany over two centuries ago, cultured despisers of religion wrongly regard the content and thrust of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures as religious-only and irrelevant to societies' needs. Such a bias reveals total unawareness with modern biblical scholarship, as today's scholars spend most of their energies exploring historical, political, anthropological, economic, sociological, psychological, folkloric, mythological, linguistic, and contextual features of biblical texts. And, most of the Bible's concerns address issues of conscience within real-life social settings. Thus, it is impossible to view the Bible's messages as irrelevant for contemporary society if the truth of its content is considered thoughtfully and contextually.[20] That's what the powerful artwork of *The Saint John's Bible* enables us to do, as the issues of social conscience it addresses are translated from one context to another. When that happens, not only are we enabled to hear the Word of the Lord; we are empowered to see it.

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