

The Labour of a Lame Monk

The Lampeter Bible (Lampeter MS 1)

MS 1, known as the 'Lampeter Bible', was given to St David's College by Thomas Burgess.¹ Quite unusually, a colophon of twelve couplets on folio 427 tells that it was copied by a monk named G. of Fécamp, on the instruction of Abbot James of St-Pierre-sur-Dives, a Benedictine monastery in the Calvados area of Normandy, and that it was completed in the fourth year of writing, 1279. G. also tells us that he was lame – which may be why he was assigned the task of copying manuscripts as his daily manual labour, rather than something more physically challenging. How long the Bible remained at St-Pierre is not known, but it passed into Carthusian hands and by the fifteenth or sixteenth century it was in England.²

The Bible contains 427 folios. Its dimensions are 335 × 250 mm, and the writing space is 245 × 170 mm. The text is written in two columns, with running heads in red and blue. Historiated initials, that is, letters that carry a visual image of a person, episode or scene, mark the beginnings and ends of books of the Bible. The Bible opens (fol. 2r) with a prologue containing the letter of St Jerome who in the fourth century was responsible for the translation into Latin of what became known as the Vulgate (common) Bible. The first letter is a capital 'F' (*Frater*, 'brother') and in the bowl of the letter is depicted a seated ecclesiastic, wearing a mitre (depicting his status as a bishop or archbishop), who is engaged in writing. At first sight this might seem to be Jerome, but he would have been wearing his cardinal's hat rather than a mitre; the figure is probably Paulinus, bishop of Nola, a correspondent of Jerome, to whom Jerome addressed the letter that forms this prologue.³ On this very first folio the evident humour of the illuminator can be seen in the images at the top of the 'F'. A variety of apes play musical instruments such as a trumpet, bagpipes and a portative organ. A boy with a bow and arrow shoots in the direction of birds. A dog chases a rabbit. In the descender more animals make music, and a donkey wearing a mitre reads from a book – possibly preaching. What may be shocking to a modern reader but is characteristic of the medieval ability to draw together the sacred and the profane, is the juxtaposition, at the base of the folio, of an image of the crucifixion of Christ and that of a child riding on the back of a bear which is led by a boy with a cudgel. Another child waits, with its mother, for its turn.

Another striking image is an extended initial 'T' (fol. 5r) of the seven days of creation. Here, and in the historiated initials throughout, the viewer is impressed by the



P L O 6

Incipit epla ier
Frater nuni p[ro]p[ri]a
 ambrosius in paulin de
 tua munuscula per b[ea]t[um] d[omi]n[u]m
 ferens detulit simul et h[uius]m[od]i
 suavisissimas l[itte]ras q[uod] lib[er]a
 a principio amicitia[m]
 fidem probate iam fidei
 et veteris amicitie no
 ua preferant. Vera
 enim illa necessitudo

est et xpi glutino copulata q[uam] n[on] uti
 litas rei familiaris si presentia tantu[m]
 corpori si subdola et palpanis adulato
 ri dei timor et diuina scripturarum
 studia consiliant. Legimus in veterib[us]
 hystorijs quosdam lustrasse prouincias
 novos adisse pp[ro]p[ri]os mare transisse ut
 eos eis ex libris nouerant coram eis

delicate artistry and fine brushstrokes. A favourite image among students who have delighted in the Bible is that of Jonah (fol. 325v). In a beautifully symmetric composition two men in pointed hats face each other in a small boat with its central mast and crossbar; animal heads form the stern and prow. Each of the men grasps Jonah by an ankle and they cast him down into the whale. His head, shoulders and arms have disappeared from view, and he appears to be about to slip out of his white undergarments.⁴ This is an example of an image that matches the content of the biblical narrative. In other instances, the connection is typological. The opening of the book of Exodus shows a New Testament scene, Christ's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (fol. 22r). Here, the narrative of Exodus (the departure of the Israelites from Egypt, their passage across the Red Sea and the receiving of the covenant with God on Mount Sinai) prefigures Christ entering Jerusalem at the beginning of Passion week, which culminated in his death and resurrection. Some images seem out of place. It would be more usual to find the Ascension of Christ at the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles; here it opens the Epistle to Titus (fol. 410).⁵ Several curly-haired and bearded disciples gaze up at the hem of Christ's garment and his feet as he disappears into Heaven.



a facie domini. Et desce
nit in domum thesauri dei sui.

tem aut amore aut odio
at prologus. Incipit liber



tult in domum thesauri dei sui.
affanaz pposito cunctorum suorum:

A further type of illustration – and another indication of the copyist's sense of humour – are the doodles that occasionally grow out of letters on the top line of a folio. Sometimes the letters extend upwards with added flourishes. On other occasions G. adds a face – are some of these a record of certain monks of St-Pierre? The mitred head on fol. 234 is surely that of Abbot James, who is also almost certainly the figure dressed in the black habit of a Benedictine monk with the mitre – a symbol of abbatial office – who in the opening initial 'O' of the *Canticum canticorum* (Song of Songs) kneels before the Virgin and Child (fol. 233v).

The Lampeter Bible is a treasure indeed, and a testament to the skill and devotion of the lame monk G. and the (nearly) four years that he spent in creating this sacred text.

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1 For descriptions see N. Ker, *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, vol. 3: *Lampeter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 1–2; Robin Ryder, 'The Library of St David's College, Lampeter', *Trivium*, 1 (Lampeter: Trivium publications, 1966), pp. 36–9; See Alison Stones, *Gothic Manuscripts 1260–1320* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2013), pp. 37, 53–60, for the relationship of the Lampeter Bible to other manuscripts from the duchy of Normandy and in particular the diocese of Rouen; Alison Stones, <https://uwtssd.ac.uk/library/special-collections/treasures-of-the-special-collections/>

2 Carthusian ownership is indicated by the way it was marked up for lections, or readings, and an English location by the appearance of English names in the margins.

3 Stones, *Gothic Manuscripts*, p. 54, identifies the figure here and in the Huth Bible (London: British Library, MS 38114–5) as Augustine.

4 Image: Stones, <https://uwtssd.ac.uk/library/special-collections/treasures-of-the-special-collections/>

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huc i ierusalem et
exquiesce i uestre ca
m i ierusalem. Tunc
dñm. et
deus salutem. Si ualeatis. si sic citu
lumus. sed & ipsi bene ualem. Adipso uos
nelaus. dicēs uelle uos descendere ad uos
apud nos. His g q̄ commēant usq̄ ad