

Commentary on the Morgan MS M.729 fol. 245v

The Morgan MS M.729 fol. 345v titled the Tree of Life, is a stunning meditation on God's salvific plan won through the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Made between 1280-1285, it is a miniature belonging to a Book of Hours first owned by a French noble-woman, Yolande Soissons. While we do not know much about her, we do know her family 'became the counts of Soissons'¹ and after her marriage to Bernard V, Seigneur of Moreuil, she would have devoted herself to her duties as a mother and wife belonging to Picardy nobility whose feudal sphere of influence lay in 'Amiens and territories just south of this city.'²

A fascinating aspect to all the miniatures in Yolande's Book of Hours are the cathedrals which enclose the scenes with pillars and lancet windows. Karen Gould explains how these 'demonstrate an advance in the spatial conception of the architectural border in French Gothic illumination.'³ The addition of the architectural designs in the 'Tree of Life' miniature conveys a deep understanding that upon this crucifixion, the church is built. Along with the cathedral, two different heraldic shields alternate along the border. The one marked with the demi-lion belonged to the Moreuil family coat of arms, and the second shield is potentially Yolande's personal coat of arms.⁴

It is within this border of church and nobility that the scene is painted with delicate lines. The soft coloring of the figures' skin emphasizes the deeper colors and draws attention to where the artist wishes you to look. Every piece is accounted for, even the shingles upon the cathedral spires. While the miniature is incredibly detailed, the figures are 'well-proportioned and graceful. The use of line is fluid and economical.'⁵ You can see the crinkle of Balaam's eye and the shadow of Jesus' clavicle. The clothing, pregnant with folds and life, gives the impression of 'three-dimensional figures.'⁶

In the center, Jesus is nailed to his cross which has transformed into the Tree of Life. Alternating colored leaves sprout against the backdrop of gold. Jesus, himself, is striking and draws the eye like a vacuum. You can see drops of blood weeping from his hands, his feet, and his side. He wears a rugged brown cloth around his waist, but shining from underneath is a stunning blue which suggests the divinity that hides in the humble figure.

¹ Karen Gould, *The Psalter and Hours of Yolande Soissons* (Massachusetts: The Medieval Academy of America, 1978), [ebook], < <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/2027/heb31150.0001.001> > p. 4.

² *ibid.*, p. 7.

³ Karen Gould, *Psalter and Hours of Yolande of Soissons*, p. 27

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 27.

Pinned to the cross is his title, 'INRI' standing for 'Jesus of Nazarene Rex Iudaeorum,' or Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.⁷ Nestled above him is a Pelican with her babies typifying the resurrection.⁸ According to medieval bestiaries, a pelican can bring her dead children back to life when she 'pierces her breast, opens her side, and lays herself across her young, pouring out her blood over the dead bodies.' This is compared to Jesus' crucifixion.⁹

Sprouting out from the cross on each side are six branches, totaling twelve in all. According to Gould, this image is a representation of the text written by St. Bonaventure, '*Lignum Vitae*.'¹⁰ This text, known as the Tree of Life, is an imaginative exercise to help apprehend the Word through the 'spiritual senses.'¹¹ The reader is invited to play the role of a witness, 'seeing intimately, up close, in detail, moving along the flesh of the Crucified.'¹² While this depiction of the Tree of Life follows a similar structure to that of others based upon this text, it is less superfluous. The heads of the prophets common to such iterations do not appear here, and no verses line the branches. In its traditional usage, one followed the pattern of the verses and branches as they travelled through the Annunciation, the Passion, and the Glorification. It is a meditation on 'the meaning of Christ's life and God's plan of salvation.'¹³ However, these subtractions do not minimize the power or impact of the painting as a whole. In fact, it allows your imagination to more freely apprehend the image and the details of the miniature.

On the right of the tree, almost unrecognizable to the modern viewer, is Moses with horns growing from his head. To the medieval man, the horned Moses was a tradition stemming from St. Jerome translating the Hebrew word '*qeren*' in Exodus as 'horned' instead of 'shining.' While it may seem like a foolish mistranslation, horns were symbolically associated with nobility, power, and salvation. Ruth Mellinkoff argues that St. Jerome equated 'horned' and 'glorified' and that for Jerome, a metaphorical usage is what he

⁷ Andrew Louth, ed., 'INRI,' *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), <<https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/view/10.1093/acref/9780199642465.001.0001/acref-9780199642465-e-3641>> [accessed 4 December 2025].

⁸ Emile Male, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Dora Nussey, 3rd edn (London & Glasgow: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1913), p. 41.

⁹ T. H. White, ed. and trans., *The Book of Beasts: Being a Translation from a Latin Bestiary of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Dover Publications, 1984), pp. 132-133.

¹⁰ Karen Gould, *Psalter and Hours of Yolande of Soissons*, p. 99.

¹¹ Kevin L. Hughes, 'By its Fruit: The Spiritual Senses in Bonaventure's 'Tree of Life',' *Medieval Mystical Theology*, 28, 1 (2019), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1080/20465726.2019.1620495>, p. 41.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ Karen Gould, *Psalter and Hours of Yolande of Soissons*, p. 99.

intended.¹⁴ Because of this, a thread depicting Moses with horns can be traced through the Middle Ages.

Beside Moses stands St. John and the Virgin Mary. The right hand was a place of honor and dignity,¹⁵ and Mary is often positioned to the right of Jesus during his crucifixion. She is swooning into John's arms, a sword stabbing her breast reminiscent of the prophecy Simeon foretold as Mary held baby Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem. Simeon said, 'a sword will pierce even your own soul,'¹⁶ and true to his forecast, she is seen suffering next to her Son.

On the left side are the centurion, Caiaphas, and Balaam.¹⁷ Caiaphas prophesied the death of Christ for political purposes, yet it fulfilled God's plans.¹⁸ Balaam, similarly, was used by God against his own purposes. Intending to curse Israel, he became a mouthpiece for the blessings of God instead.¹⁹ The figure closest to the tree on the left is the centurion who at Jesus' crucifixion recognized and publicly declared him 'the Son of God.'²⁰ Each of these men were mouthpieces for God's plans, but only the centurion, closest to the Passion, saw the truth of his own words.

The Tree of Life in Yolande Soissons Book of Hours is a beautiful and riveting piece that invites you to rest your imagination on the origin, the Passion, and the glorification of Christ.²¹ In the medieval Christian mind, His suffering on the cross redeemed the Tree of Life and allowed the fruits of life to bloom for all people. Here that dichotomy is depicted in precise and loving detail.

Bibliography

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¹⁴ Ruth W. Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art and Thought* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1970), p. 78.

¹⁵ Emile Male, *The Gothic Image*, p. 6.

¹⁶ Luke 2:35, 'New American Standard Bible,' *Artisan Collection Bible* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p. 902.

¹⁷ Karen Gould, *The Psalter and Hours of Yolande of Soissons*, pp. 101-102.

¹⁸ John 11:49-53 'New American Standard Bible,' *Artisan Collection Bible* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p. 947.

¹⁹ Numbers 23:11-12, 'New American Standard Bible,' *Artisan Collection Bible* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p. 143.

²⁰ Matthew 27:54, 'New American Standard Bible,' *Artisan Collection Bible* (Michigan: Zondervan, 1995), p. 877.

²¹ *ibid.*, pp. 99-102.

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