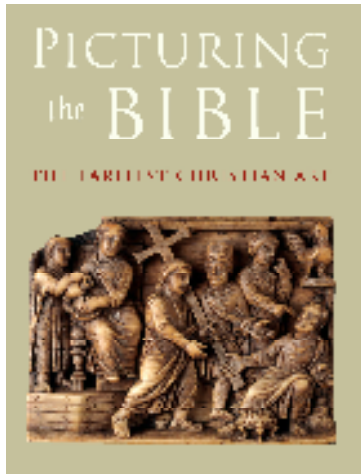


Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art / Jeffrey Spier.--New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, December 2007.--328 p.: ill.--ISBN: 978-0-300-1163-0; \$65.00.



The past decade has seen a marked interest in biblical imagery resulting in a plethora of essays, exhibition catalogs and collected works documenting the iconography and symbolic works of Christianity. This exhibition catalog consists of a formidable assemblage of world treasures that the essay authors have chosen to discuss within the context of their themes; the objects are also documented in the traditional format of individual catalog entries. Jeffrey Spier, guest curator and general editor of this book, begins with the Jewish and pagan antecedents of early Christian art, documenting their evolution most notably from Syrian and Egyptian roots through Asia Minor to Greece and finally to Rome.

Spier reminds us that Christianity was an eastern religion with its literary, artistic, philosophic, and ethical roots deeply embedded in the traditions of the Middle East; he discusses such monuments as the murals of the Early Christian church at Dura Europos, Syria, where a primitive form of the much-repeated image of the good shepherd appears and cites well-known authors, particularly the early church father Clement of Alexandria, whose writings advised artists on theme and composition.

These religious writers influenced and inspired artists to use art and exegesis as a method of elucidating the multiple meanings of scripture and thus popularized narrative art forms.

Johannes Deckers, author of the chapter on Constantine the Great explores the various effects of religious acceptance and its aftermath in artistic circles, leading, of course, to public, large-scale, didactic episodes of the life of Christ. Mural decoration of this type quickly emerged onto the walls of churches and sanctuaries rendering some formulaic symbolism of catacomb art obsolete.

From the handful of rare illustrated bibles extant from the sixth century, three are represented in this exhibition. Herbert Kessler's essay on early decorated Bibles takes as its poster child the Rabbula Gospels; famous as the oldest extant illustrated gospel book, it is written in Syriac and accompanied by both full-page illuminations and more intimate miniatures that serve as glosses along the text's margins. Kessler implies that there may have been a Syrian workshop that produced the illuminations for Armenian and Ethiopian books, citing as examples the famous Etschmiadsin Gospels of Armenia and the less-known, yet more provocative Abba Garima Gospels of Ethiopia.

Sturdy remnants of mosaics, wall paintings and terracotta fragments, silver, gold and ivory work, coins and medals, and vital manuscripts are all beautifully illustrated in color photographs that supplement the text. An extensive bibliography expands upon the research potential of this publication, allowing the reader access to recent developments in the study of early Christianity. This monograph was published to accompany an exhibition of the same title organized by the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth. The exhibition organizers successfully brought together a panorama of approximately 100 hundred pieces of art from a number of illustrious international libraries, museums, and private collections; it is, therefore, more regrettable that such an inspired and insightful exhibition has been restricted to a single venue.

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