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Setting the Word into Motion: Textual Visuality in the Bible Moralisée, Vienna Codex 2554

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Word and Visuality

The story goes that Thamus said many things to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts, ...but when they came to the letters, "The invention, O king," said Theuth, "will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered." But Thamus replied, "Most ingenious Theuth, one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another; and now you, who are the father of letters, have been led by your affection to ascribe to them a power the opposite of that which they really possess. For this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are not part of themselves, will discourage the use of their memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer the pupils an appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom." (Plato, 274 E -275A) ¹

Wisdom, a central theme in many of Plato's works, receives a notable discussion at the end of the *Phaedrus*, in which Socrates recounts the ancient tradition about the invention of letters by the Egyptian god Theus. Among the arts (*τέχνης*), which for the Greeks encompassed the learned and taught activities, the invention of letters stands out, according to Theus an "elixir of wisdom and memory." Yet Theus is immediately warned of the deceptive qualities of the invented elixir by the king of Egypt, Thamus. The question whether the letter is an elixir or rather a toxin in obtaining true wisdom remains unresolved in the myth. ² The concern regarding the potentially ambiguous qualities of letters, equally occupied the minds of the learned during the medieval age, in particular in their efforts to translate and interpret the Word of God. As Thamus worried about the effectiveness in speaking and communicating through letters, medieval theologians as guardians of the sacred text had to be vigilant about God's Word. An example of the delicacy of the task and the efforts to guard letters from potentially false interpretations are the so called *Bibles moralisées*. The works are extraordinary manuscripts, created between the early thirteenth to the fifteenth century, in which biblical texts and textual commentaries alternate with most extravagant illuminations assigned to respective text passages. This article examines the relation between the biblical Word and visuality in one of the thirteenth century manuscripts of the *Bibles moralisées*, the codex Vindobonensis 2554 today housed in Vienna. ³ The codex is among the earliest surviving examples of the so called *Bible moralisées* or moralized Bibles appearing around this time in France. ⁴ The purpose of these works is to offer moralized interpretations of the biblical

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Harold North Fowler, LCL. (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1914 repr. 1999).

² The ambivalence of the word *pharmakon* translated either as elixir or toxin is at the core of Jacques Derrida's famous essay "Plato's Pharmacy" (1968) reprinted in *La Dissémination*, 1972, and trans. by Barbara Johnson in *Dissemination*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 63-171. Paul Ricoeur also has discussed the Platonic myth. He focuses on the relevance of letters for memory and history. *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Trans. Kathleen Bleme and David Pellauer. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 1441-445.

³ *Bible Moralisée*, Codex Vindobonensis 2554. Vienna, ÖNB.

⁴ Vienna, ÖNB, Codex 1179. c. 1215/1230; Vienna, ÖNB, Codex 2554. c. 1215/1230; Toledo, Cathedral Treasury (3 volumes) 1220s/30.

text, each text section juxtaposed with a beautifully painted medallion that offers a visual commentary.⁵ The *Bibles moralisées* have been studied extensively regarding style, tradition, iconography, patronage, and historical context.⁶ This particular analysis will focus specifically on the relations between word and visuality. The goal is to investigate the vitality that may set the Word into motion. It is argued that the matrix of textual visuality in the Vienna codex 2554 is used as an effective tool that adds vitality to the biblical passages while simultaneously creating a firm hierarchy of representation and resemblances that enforces not only certain norms but also a particular world order in 13th century French society. The early thirteenth century, marked a particularly volatile time of change for the Catholic Church with the rise of a scholarly guild at the University in Paris, eager to defend their privileges such as exemptions from reprisals and special judicial protection.⁷ In 1211, Aristotle's texts were burned in Paris, and the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX were entered into Canon Law, requesting that scriptures were only to be understood by the clergy, setting off a struggle for power between the secular and the religious authority.⁸ Another significant milestone was reached during the Lateran Council 1215, an attempt to organize the body of believers through regulations, intended to control moral actions in the personal lives of Christians.⁹ Perhaps the most important reformation of the canonical law was that the sacrament of penance was codified requiring regular confessions. This mandate essentially provided the Church with an effective control over the Christian population. In such a political context, it was essential for Church officials to reaffirm the exclusive claim to the interpretation of scripture as the foundation of a world ordered according to the Word. The Word, however, is an unruly companion, not easily controlled.

As Socrates warns, words and images may pose the danger to unleash unwanted thoughts and deeds:

“he who receives...that anything in writing will be clear and certain, would be an utterly simple person...if he thinks written words are of any use except to remind him who knows the matter about which they are written...Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting; for the creatures of painting stand like living beings, but if one asks them a question, they preserve a solemn silence.” (Plato, 275 d)¹⁰

Plato's comparison to the creatures of painting standing out as living beings is a warning also for the erudite who created texts such as discussed in the examples below, in which graphic depictions in manuscripts interpret the biblical text. How is the Word to be safely passed on to the storehouse of memory? What is the

⁵ Scholars generally agree that the four oldest versions of the fifteen surviving moralized bibles were most likely written during the thirteenth century, involving scholars from the University in Paris. See Katherine H. Tachau, “God's Compass and Vana Curiositas: Scientific Study in The Old French Bible Moralisée,” *The Art Bulletin* 80/1 (1998): 28, n 9.

⁶ A bibliographic overview can be found in: *Bible Moralisée, Codex Vindobonensis 2554*, trans. and commentary by Gerald B. Guest (London: Harvey Publishers, 1995), 49-52.

⁷ Pearl Kibre, “Scholarly Privileges: Their Roman Origins and Medieval Expression,” *The American Historical Review* 59/ 3 (1954): 551-555.

⁸ James Michael Heinlen, “The Ideology of Reform in the French Moralized Bible” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1991) 126.

⁹ Jacques Le Goff, *Kultur des Mittelalters*, trans. Gerda Kurz und Sieglinde Summerer (Frankfurt/M/Wien/ Zürich : Büchergilde Gutenberg, 1970) 154.

¹⁰ Plato. *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, LCL. (Cambridge/London: Harvard University Press, 1930, repr. 1994).

role of visuality making the Word accessible to lay people as a colorfully illuminated entity? Is the goal to communicate the lively Word or the solemn silence, as invoked by Socrates? The danger posed by the word to a social entity already caused Socrates to repudiate the role of the poets in the ideal city in the *Republic*, fearing that the words were to mislead the people.¹¹ Keeping order in the medieval world was certainly also on the minds of Church officials who were guarding the Word of God. The intellectual ferment spreading through Paris in the thirteenth century posed a challenging task. Again, at stake was the Word, which was feared to be misinterpreted. The masters who designed the Vienna Codex 2554 make optimal use of the visual dimension and commentary to safeguard the Word. Yet as letters, images are also not without ambiguities. Theologians and doctors were frequently torn between the beneficial qualities of iconic representations, often actively supporting their use, while at another time suspiciously warning of the dangerous move from sacred iconography to idolatry.¹² They were well aware that neither the letter nor the image could fully tame the unruly qualities of letters in the hands of lay people who were not initiated into the truth of the heavenly Word. In such a context, the *Bibles moralisées* are extraordinary examples in which the “elixir” of writing and painting is meant to preserve reference and resemblance to a heavenly wisdom with the goal to ensure that the readership may not contemplate deviant thoughts or aberrant modes of being.

Images as a Path to Memorization

The fact that despite the increase of written material from the eleventh century on, the “medieval culture remained profoundly memorial in nature”, as Mary Carruthers argues, makes textual visuality a particularly important tool for education.¹³ Generally, medieval theologians perceived of memory in terms of a spatial organization of reenacted cognitive, emotive, evaluative, and imaginative experiences that could receive considerable support from imagery.¹⁴ Jerome argues: “Nothing, thus, is useful to have been seen or heard, unless you stored what is seen or heard in the treasury of the memory.”¹⁵ As part of the memory, images were considered to exhibit significant influence on the soul, “an essential means for elevation to the most sublime truths, the most abstract concepts.”¹⁶ In this sense, images were believed to accentuate visually the sacred knowledge of the biblical text in a controlled space that in its compositional order articulated the world. Augustine’s discussion of the decisive role of the image (*imago*) for the human being in the search for God in his *Confessions* was considered a key passage during the medieval age:

¹¹ Plato, *Republic*, 595-608 c.

¹² See for example Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image. An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 123-64.

¹³ Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) See also Carruthers extensive analysis of mnemonic practices in medieval thought in: *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, rhetoric, and the making of images* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) esp. 10-16.

¹⁴ Carruthers, 1990, 60.

¹⁵ Jerome, *Commentarium in Ezechiel*, XII, 40; PL 25, 373D. trans. Eva Maria Räßle.

¹⁶ Lina Bolzoni, *The Web of Images: Vernacular Preaching from its Origin to St Bernadino da Siena* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2004) 47.

And I enter the fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the senses. There, in the memory, is likewise stored what we cogitate, either by enlarging or reducing our perceptions, or by altering one way or another those things which the senses have made contact with; and everything else that has been entrusted to it and stored up in it, which oblivion has not yet swallowed up and buried...

Out of the same storehouse, with these past impressions, I can construct now this, now that, image of things that I either have experienced or have believed on the basis of experience--and from these I can further construct future actions, events, and hopes; and I can meditate on all these things as if they were present. "I will do this or that"--I say to myself in that vast recess of my mind, with its full store of so many and such great images-- "and this or that will follow upon it." "O that this or that could happen!" "God prevent this or that." I speak to myself in this way; and when I speak, the images of what I am speaking about are present out of the same store of memory; and if the images were absent I could say nothing at all about them.¹⁷

For Augustine, the memory was a storehouse for the images imprinted by the senses. Yet these images were not fixed in their place but provided the materials for new images. The image of things in the "halls of memory" thus provided the foundation for creative imagination regarding the future, that is to say hope and future actions. Imagination and images provided an essential, although not clearly defined, aspect of the human ability to think and communicate with God (*cogito*).

During the medieval age, listening to recitation not reading itself was a most common practice. Listening was an important process in which the text was thought to become part of the memory through mental images. In this process, memory provided the structural organization in which the sacred text was brought to mind. The process of memorization, enhanced by sensation and aided in the organization was thought to allow human beings to perceive something appearing in mere thought to be contemplated as analogous to what was seen in the presentation. Iconography thus served as important device allowing the believer to enter a spiritual dimension. The act of memorization was not just considered a process that caused knowledge. More importantly, seeing likeness between representation and mental imagery was thought to provide the foundation for judgment, imagination, and emotion.¹⁸ Given this all important role of the visible, the memory as a storehouse for images offered a matrix that ordered knowledge as manifested in the biblical text and its verbal as well as visual interpretations. In such a context, visuality of the text first of all served the purpose of memorization of doctrinal truth.

Medieval theologians, however, were equally aware that the pictorial element does not only speak to the senses by adding structure. An important function was to add a particular focus, often color and liveliness. In

¹⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, 8, 12; 14 trans. Albert C. Outler, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/confessions-bod.html>

¹⁸ For an extensive discussion on the philosophical tradition of memory influenced by Aristotelian thought see: Carruthers, 1990, 46-60.

this regard, images frequently are more immediate means of communication than texts, especially since reading is essentially perceived as a visual act. Shapes, colors, forms, and composition may effectively compel the reader to follow a certain interpretation of the biblical word. Mnemonic techniques thus utilized the spatial qualities in order to guide the mental pictures via compositional structures, a work of interpretation which provided focus on specific themes. Memory in the Middle Ages “is the matrix within which humans perceive present and future...mediated by the past...this is quite different from insisting as Renaissance and modern scholars have done, that the past is mediated by the present.”¹⁹ This matrix, which in the visual dimension effectively binds present and future to the past, also provides an all important order for the medieval world. This order has its origin in the biblical Word which is not only the firm foundation for visibility of the following illuminations but also organizes thoughts and modes of being for those exposed to Word.

An Elixir of Memory

The typological exegesis in the *Bible moralisée*, of which exemplary scenes from the codex Vindobonensis 2554 will be discussed below, is likely one of the most elaborate attempts to securely bind the Word to visuality in using an organized matrix of resemblances. The highly illuminated Bible promises to be an “elixir of memory and wisdom” such as Theus claims to have invented. Scripture is inscribed into a web of mesmerizing textual visuality as sign, words and images potentially refer to something known beyond itself.²⁰ Was the early manuscript production in the hands of monks, increasingly from the twelfth century, production was also undertaken in Universities and other secular places.²¹ The following typological exegesis in the Vienna codex 2445 likely shows the hands of theologians from the University in Paris.²² The commentary includes references of the Church Fathers and glosses from Peter Lombard’s and Langton’s commentaries but also unidentified sources which provide a window into a work of 13th century biblical education.²³

The pages are composed as an intricate matrix, in which two rows of four texts are paired with circular medallions. Analogy and univocity, frequently the center of debates about language in the Middle Ages, are

¹⁹ Carruthers, 1990, 193.

²⁰ Concerning the complex thirteenth century debates on the topic of *res significata* and *modi significandi* among logicians and grammarians see: E. J. Ashworth, “Signification and Modes of Signifying in thirteenth Century Logic: A Preface to Aquinas on Analogy” p. 44.

http://cip.library.cornell.edu/DPubS?service=Repository&version=1.0&verb=Disseminate&handle=cip.mpat/1159539709&view=body&content-type=pdf_1

²¹ For a historical overview see: Christian Gastgeber et al. “Textual traditions and editorial revision: Bibles from their beginnings to the standardized Bibles of the 13th century,” in: Andreas Fingernagel and Christian Gastgeber, *In the Beginning was the Word* (Köln: Taschen, 2003) 32-5.

²² Guest, 1995, 19.

²³ Ibid. 21-24.

brought to a heightened art in this work in which each text passage is given a visual interpretation.²⁴ Biblical passages and commentaries that offer a moralizing interpretation of the respective scripture passage alternate. Each scripture passage and commentary is respectively adjoined to a colorful medallion. Like a mirror, these medallions give visibility to the words of the apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians 1: 13: “videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate, tunc autem facie ad faciem” (seeing now in a mirror, in an obscured manner, then face to face). Such “medallion mirrors” played an essential role in a world of symbols, resemblances, and codes, perceived to be extended into a world beyond, as Johan Huizinga argues.²⁵

In the Vienna codex 2554, the medallions dominate the pages, framed by biblical and exegetical texts that essentially act as captions, suggesting an audience that was overall instructed by images. Visuality thus binds illuminated biblical scenes to moralizing commentaries, with the effect that resemblances are multiplied and enforced. The first two medallions and the fifth and sixth medallion are accompanied by selections from scripture. The medallions three and four and seven and eight provide a visualization of what is signified in the text explained on the side according to the following matrix:

Biblical text A	Image A	Image B	Biblical text B
Commentary a	Image a	Image b	Commentary b
Biblical text C	Image C	Image D	Biblical text D
Commentary c	Image c	Image d	Commentary d

The juxtaposition between biblical reference and contemporary moral problems offer a visual exposition of moralizing interpretations, revealing a world in which Christians are constantly tempted and wickedness prevails. The materials used such as large sheets of high-quality parchment, luxurious materials for ink and paint, including lapis lazuli and gold leaf on hundreds of pages, could only have been afforded by extraordinary wealthy patrons. The craftsmanship and theological expertise, characteristic for the moralized Bibles must have required an outstanding effort.

In consequence, the *Bibles moralisées* have been called *Speculum Principis* or Mirror of Princes, assuming the royal family among the recipients of the work. It is likely that a member/members of the Capetian family were

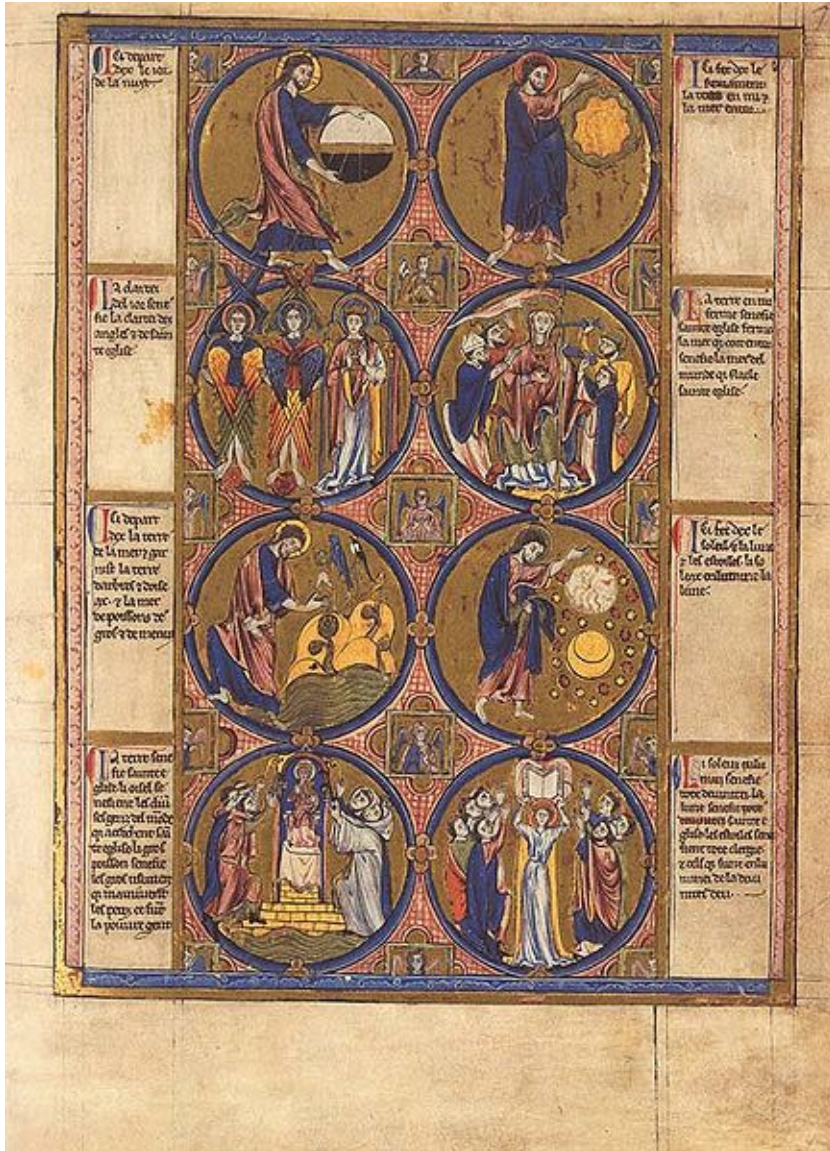
²⁴Regarding the thirteenth-century discussions on univocity and analogy see: McInerney, Ralph, "The Analogy of Names is a Logical Doctrine," in idem: *Being and Predication: Thomistic Interpretations* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1986) 279-86. Rosier, Irène. "Res significata et modus significandi: Les implications d'une distinction médiévale," in *Sprachtheorien in Spätantike und Mittelalter*, ed. Sten Ebbesen (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1995) 135-68.

²⁵ Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, trans. R. J. Payton and U. Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 235. Also: Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press) 52-64.

initiators of the Vienna codex 2554 since the text seems to respond to the religious, intellectual, and political context of 13th century France.²⁶ Not only are the *Bibles moralisées* remarkable examples of strategies that bind visuality to the sacred Word and interpretation with the goal to disclose a Christian ethos yet perhaps even more importantly, this ethos is claiming a strict social order, largely enforced through the detailed moral code. In limiting the excessive outflow of uncontrolled knowledge and uncontrolled interpretations, the work, hence, suggests that the authors were interested in using text and imagery effectively to regulate deviant interpretations and aberrant beliefs among competing groups in society. The different audiences who may have been the targets for the specific interpretive moralizing strategies include lay rulers and their advisors, but also students and clergy considered aberrant as well as heretics, especially Jews.²⁷ These groups appear prominently, identified through their appearances and medieval clothing.

²⁶ Heinlen, 1991, 209.

²⁷ Tachau for example convincingly argues that the learned community, in particular astronomers and philosophers immersed in the studies of the world “in effect become idolaters, worshipping the world rather than its Creator.” 1998, 27.



Bible Moralisée, Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 2554. fol. 2 r

Following is an outline of the matrix of text and visuality in fol. 1 r., the first word, image page in the work. The theme is God's creation (Gen 1:3-16).

A Gen 1:3-5 - God separates day and night

a Commentary

B Gen 1:6-9 - God creates the firmament , the earth and sea

b Commentary

C Gen 1:9-12, 20-22 – God separates earth and sea, creates trees, birds, and fish

c Commentary

D Gen 1:14-16 – God creates the sun, moon, and stars

d Commentary

The first two globes show God Father moving forward in his creative work. He separates night from day and commands the creation of the firmament, the earth and sea around it (Gen 1:3-5; 6-9). Light flows from medallion A into the one below (a), which the commentary explains as representing the “light of the angels and the light of the Holy Church.”²⁸ Earth and sea are interpreted as signs for the life of the Church which appears on a throne in the center of the commentary roundel exposed to torments from the sea, represented by people who threaten the Church with weapons and words. The clothing designates prominently censured groups in the medieval Christian society. Robe and miter typify bishops, tonsures the less important ranks. One figure is holding a money sack. A mean looking figure threatens the Church with a dagger. The pointed hat (*pileum cornutum*) worn by another figure may well symbolize a Jew, a group, which prominently appears as enemy to the Church in league with the Antichrist (folio 58 vc) and Satan (folio 52 va).²⁹ The following medallion (C) pictures God bending downwards, separating the earth from the sea. His hand reaches out to bring forth plants, trees, animals, and fishes (Gen 1:9-12; 20-22). Medallion D conveys a playful act, God creating sun, moon, and stars (Gen 1:14-16). The commentary explicates the divine order. Is the earth as foundation the sign of the Holy Church, the birds reveal the people tearing down at the Church, and the large fish are the money lenders who eat the “small fish” the poor people (c). In contrast to the reference to usury in the textual commentary, the typical money bag or bowl, however, is absent in the visual interpretation. Instead, members of the clergy, identified through their hooded robes and tonsures, threaten the Church who sits on a throne. The lure of desiring material wealth serves as a prominent *topos* signifying sin and pollution. In this tumultuous world, God illuminates the Holy Church (moon), clergy and erudite people, as signified by the sun (1).

The rays of light reflected in the gold leaf illuminate text and commentary. They are a visual feast for the eyes, in which chaos is replaced through God’s Word. White color, the sign of purity, permeates the Holy Church. Ranks are established firmly in this first page of categorized texts and globes. The world is divided into good and evil in this first sequence that serves as the foundation not only for the commentary for the whole world order. The order is enshrined in the Word of God, held up high by the Church. Who receives the light of

²⁸ Guest, 1995, 54.

²⁹ While anti Jewish sentiments are prevalent throughout the commentary, the iconography denoting the figure of Jews and heretics is first and foremost characterized by an intentional and meaningful ambiguity. Although, from the 13th century on orders existed for Jews living in Christian societies to wear distinctive clothing, there was not a uniform standard or distinctive symbol, costume, which identified Jews. Accordingly, the prevalent use of the *pileum* in Christian art was an attempt to visually codify a certain attitude towards Jews” as Sara Lipton convincingly argues. Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the 'Bible moralisée'* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 17.

God and who endangers the good creation is clearly delineated, with the Church and clergy firmly in charge over the revealed Word. Eyes easily marvel at the beautiful illuminations, aiding the memory to never again forget that God is the powerful good creator who has shaped the universe from chaos, even if threatened, the Church stands firm amongst any torrents. An intricate net of commentary and signification thus sets off a moralizing exegesis, intended to shelter readers from aberrant beliefs and wrongful actions. As in a mathematical equation, sacred Word and moralizing commentary are assertively connected with the visual dimension in each respective medallion. In addition, the complex exegesis facilitates a spatially systematized order that imprints a specific typology into the memory of the medieval mind. God, the creator, has set the Church in control over the interpretation of the biblical text, guardians over laity and heretics.

Was the theme of folio 1r God's creation of the world, folio 2r in the Vienna codex 2554 describes the story of the fall depicting biblical scenes as follows:

A Gen 2:22-24 – God joins Adam and Eve

a Commentary

B Gen 3:1-6 – the serpent deceives Eve and Adam

b Commentary

C Gen 3:9-12 – Adam blames Eve for handing the fruit to him

c Commentary

D Gen 3:21, 23-24 – Adam is given a coat and Adam and Eve are expelled from Paradise

d Commentary

According to the commentary, the marriage between Adam and Eve signifies the marriage between Christ and the Church while Adam and Eve's disobedience in paradise depicts desire. The female head of the serpent offers an austere warning to keep a watchful eye on the weak human nature, especially the female nature. Given that few women appear in the overall manuscript, the prominent appearance of Eve highlights the danger posed not only by the first woman but by her descendants as well.³⁰

Medallion b opens the view to a turbulent sexual encounter driven by desire and forces of evil visualized by three dark demonic figures. The scene pictures the historical medieval context. The commentary to this medallion speaks of the failure of the sinner as follows:

That Eve and Adam were deceived and transgressed the commandment of God through the enticement of the devil signifies those who through the desire of their bodies transgress the

³⁰ Guest, 1995, 37.

commandment of God, and the devil ensnares them by the neck and by the mouth and by the loins and pulls them into hell.³¹

Neither the visual nor the textual interpretations leave any doubt that the bodies of Adam and Eve ruled by desire are the cause of the reoccurring transgression of God's commands. Veils and clothing cannot hide shameful actions. Desire, which has no place in the marriage between Christ and the Church, is devastating those who cannot resist temptation. Medallion b provides the visual evidence that the loss of innocence is not a temporal event but will have lasting effects for future generations. The shameful appearance of the couple and their frightened movements in medallions c and d convey a stark contrast to their innocent nakedness in the first two scenes. The medallions c and d with adjacent commentaries further underline the nature of sinfulness for those who follow the first couple in their actions. Commentary d states:

That God threatens Adam and Eve, and he excuses himself says that the woman did it, signifies that God threatens sinners and they excuse themselves and say: Lord, we were born in such an age that it befits us to be covetous and lustful and murderous and commit sins.³²

As Adam blamed Eve for being seduced, the medieval people pleading before God excuse their sinful actions. They point the finger on the times, which cause murder and lustful behavior. Medallion d reveals a frightening scene, Jesus Christ driving the sinners from his reign into Hell.³³ Despite the looming consequences illustrated, the descendants of Adam and Eve replicate the sinful disobedience practiced by the first couple. The commentary emphasizes punishment for transgressions in a society that is given a mirror of their own world. Of course it is impossible to know whether the condemnation of sexual licentiousness ultimately convinced the readership. All that can be said here is that highly sophisticated techniques are employed to guard the Word through a complex moralizing interpretation. For the medieval context, the lesson of the moralized Bible interprets contemporary problems with unswerving clarity. Fol 1r and 2r, therefore, set the stage for a universe, designed as distinct order, an order that in this world is in danger of being lost because of moral failure. The moralizing exegesis of the Word, safeguarded by the Holy Church and handed to the laymen through the clergy, will ensure, so the promise, that the original order will not be lost forever.³⁴

Imagery in the Vienna codex 2554 likely preceded any work on the commentary. The text was added after the gilding and painting had been finished, an indication of the prominence of the art of illumination in the work.³⁵ The fact that the superior craftsmanship still captivates modern viewers, who may know very little

³¹ Ibid. 55.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Regarding the moralized bible in the context of the Fourth Lateran Council see: James Michael Heinlen. 1991.

³⁵ John Lowden, *The Making of the Bibles Moralises* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000) 42.

about the content, unable to read the script, speaks for the power of the visual appearance. It surely must have enchanted those who were the first recipients as well. The Word, indeed, appears like a living being. Yet one may be well advised to question the magnificent matrixes of text and illuminations. What appears as beauty may as well be named persuasiveness, an appearance giving the illusion of knowledge yet a knowledge that is meticulously controlled in image and word with a moralizing agenda. What is purported so effectively through the visual appearance, the allure of meticulous craftsmanship, and the sheer beauty of form and extraordinary materials? What should the readership be reminded of in those matrixes that firmly bestow an interpretation in letters and images on the viewer? The unrelenting moralizing interpretations suggest that an important goal of the work was to create firm reminders not living words of the ethos required for a mode of being in the 13th century medieval society in France. In consequence, the work fortifies the authority over interpretations of scripture, trapping any aberrant thoughts before they emerge and potentially initiate moves that could threaten the power of the Church. One may well wonder whether “the living and breathing word” as described in Plato’s dialog is absent in these well connected matrixes of textual visuality, whether words and images are mere appearances of life and beauty or wisdom.

The portrayed figure types in the medallions clearly determine a world-order in which clothes, head coverings, colors, and position in the medallion demarcate Christian virtues and vices for any of the different classes of people in the medieval society. In contrast to the fantastic bodies created by some of the gothic craftsman, in which mixed bodily identities seem to be explored and imagined, the Vienna codex 2554 is an elaborate, diligent attempt to restrict extravagant visual expression, while exploiting most successfully the potential of visual beauty. The magnificent craftsmanship, the gold leaf, the splendid colors, and perfect proportions leave the viewer in awe. Symbolism and allegorical exegesis are compellingly used to communicate transcendent beauty. Yet the exquisite materials, splendid colors, and a well systematized structure of textual visuality seem to serve one foremost goal that is to implement the moral code set by the Catholic Church, irrevocably embedding the Word into medieval life. In other words, beautiful appearance and coherence between text and visuality become effective tools to safely store in the house of memory a particular social order and moral rules. The Vienna codex 2554 is written in the French vernacular, the tongue of the general populace not in Latin as some of the other moralized Bibles. Concern that the sacred word might fall into the hands of those who might interpret must have been heightened at a moment in history when access to knowledge begins to be acquired outside the immediate control of the Church.³⁶ Such claim, of course, posed a serious threat to Church authority. It would seem that the text, conceding the use of the vernacular, accommodates those who were not able to master the Latin text of the Vulgate. Yet the unyielding web of textual visuality ensured that the sign did not lead to possible misinterpretation of the sacred Word, closely guarded for its spiritual

³⁶ See Michael Camille for an analysis of “visual literacy” in the Vienna Bible Moraliseé cod. 2554. “Visual signs of the sacred page: books in the *Bible moraliseé*,” *Word and Image* 5/1 (1989): 11-30.

meaning by the authorities of the Church. In its strict pursuit of relegating deviant interpretations, letters and images have been unarmed of their power to set thought and imagination free. The work consequently enshrines the hegemony of the guardians of the biblical text. Princes, lay people, and heretics are all given their due place in God's order of the world. The designer of this order is God (folio 1r), an order for which the Church who marries Christ is given the crown of life (folio 2r). As much as the Vienna codex 2554 is admired for its extraordinary beauty and pictorial persuasion, it is also an astounding achievement for which Socrates' warning should be kept in mind, namely that the invention of letters and the trust in writing "will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory."³⁷ The question remains whether this treasure of a book is an *elixir* or *toxin*.

Appendix:

Bible Moralisée; Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Codex Vindobonensis 2554. fol. 2r
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BibleMoralisee.jpg>

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³⁷ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 275A.