

PAINTED PROPHECY

The Hebrew Bible through Christian Eyes

Stories from the Hebrew Bible were among the most important subjects for the illumination of Christian manuscripts in the Middle Ages (about 500–1500). The Hebrew scriptures common to Judaism and Christianity are known to Christians as the Old Testament; they constitute about 70 percent of the Christian Bible. The death of Jesus Christ, whom Christians believe to be a divinely anointed Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Bible, gave rise to a new canon of sacred literature: the New Testament. From its beginnings, Christianity searched Hebrew scripture for proof to support perceived connections between events in the Old Testament and the New in accordance with a complex doctrine of fulfilled prophecy.

The manuscript illuminations that accompanied Old Testament stories provided crucial visual interpretations of those connections that were central to the medieval Christian reception and understanding of the text. The images were flexible, both incorporating and actively shaping the religious and cultural concerns of readers. The illuminations reflect aspects of the medieval mindset, including the understanding of history as linked to prophecy, beliefs about women in society, and the hostility Christians felt toward Jewish communities as a result of differing perceptions of their shared sacred texts. The selection of works in this gallery demonstrates that the Hebrew Bible was a living document, its contents subject to ongoing interpretation.

The pages of manuscripts are made of parchment (specially prepared animal skin), painted with tempera. Because these materials are sensitive to light, this exhibition is presented at low light levels.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.

History, Prophecy, and Biblical Time

Medieval Christians considered many Old Testament stories to be part of ancient history. They copied events told in scripture into chronicles alongside accounts of famous wars and the exploits of past kings. The historical events of the Old Testament were simultaneously conflated with biblical prophecy, a Christian understanding of the scope of time that began with the Creation described in Genesis and will end with the return of Christ at the Last Judgment. This timeline was a reinterpretation of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible, reworked to fit into the Christian belief system, which dictated that every event in the Old Testament foreshadowed one in the New. Though both Christians and Jews were reading the same biblical prophecies in their shared texts, medieval Christians understood them to predict the arrival of Jesus as the Messiah, while Jewish people rejected that characterization.

Women across Traditions

Medieval depictions of women, couched in imagery from the Old Testament, reflect the ideologies and stereotypes that were intended to guide feminine behavior. The Hebrew Bible describes and celebrates the exploits of many heroines who were known as religious leaders, prophets, and women who bravely acted to defend their people from enemies. The figure of Eve, introduced in the book of Genesis as the first mortal woman, is a more controversial example. While some medieval Jewish thought acknowledged the concept of an original sin at least partially perpetrated by Eve, she became far more important in the faith and art of medieval Christians. They considered the Virgin Mary a redemptive figure in opposition to Eve, who had caused the downfall of humanity. These female types were instrumental in shaping the concepts of good and bad women in the Middle Ages.

Christians Interpreting Hebrew Scripture

For medieval Christians, the entire Old Testament could be seen as evidence—its meaning often veiled—pointing to events fulfilled in the New Testament; this theological doctrine is known as “typology.” Old Testament prefigurations, or “types,” for Christ included Jonah, who emerged from a fish’s belly after three days, appearing to rise from death as the Christian faithful believed Christ miraculously rose from the dead three days after his Crucifixion. Central to the practice of medieval Christianity was the faith that events in the New Testament and the development of the Christian church had been not only foreseen but also ordained by God at the beginning of time. This interpretation depended on a notion of history divided by the pivotal moments of Christ’s life and death. It was a way of reconciling Hebrew scripture with a Christian worldview of model and fulfillment that found frequent expression in manuscript illumination.

The Jewish Presence in Medieval Europe

Though the interpretation of Hebrew scriptures formed the foundations of Christian belief during the Middle Ages, Christian attitudes toward Jewish populations living in medieval Europe were fraught. Old Testament figures were held up as examples of both positive and negative behavior, yet anti-Jewish sentiment was widespread. Many images in manuscripts reflect Christian prejudices against Judaism as a faith, and in turn they had a key role in the rise of violent and discriminatory acts against the Jewish people. Examples ranged from forced conversions and laws restricting their activities in society to expulsions from various countries and even mass murders. Often obscured in the telling of this history are the Jewish communities who practiced their faith throughout the medieval period. A vibrant intellectual, religious, and artistic tradition can be seen in the production of texts and material objects that bear witness to the continued contributions of Jewish writers and thinkers throughout the European Middle Ages.

This material was published in 2022 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Painted Prophecy: The Hebrew Bible through Christian Eyes*, March 8–May 29, 2022, at the Getty Center.

To cite this material, please use: *Painted Prophecy: The Hebrew Bible through Christian Eyes*, published online in 2022, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/painted_prophecy