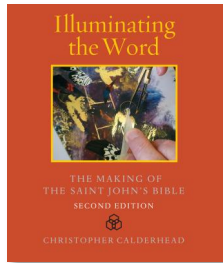


## [Review] *Illuminating the Word: The Making of the Saint John's Bible*, 2nd ed., by Christopher Calderhead



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**Calderhead, Christopher.** *Illuminating the Word: The Making of the Saint John's Bible*, 2nd ed. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2015. 342pp. ISBN 978-0-8146-9132-8.

For me, illumination has long been an exceptionally intriguing art form. Perhaps it's that the illustrations often accompany sacred texts, or maybe it's the myth, legends, and miraculous history that surround these artworks. We may never know the precise source of the attractive power found in illuminated texts, but the Saint John's Bible is a recent project worthy of such contemplation. The Saint John's Bible is in the tradition of illumination made famous by the *Book of Kells* and the *Gutenberg Bible*. Enthusiasm for that tradition will attract readers to Christopher Calderhead's *Illuminating the Word*. When I encounter great works of art, they enthrall my mind not only by the experience of them, but also by the stories behind them. The Saint John's Bible is a great work of art, but *Illuminating the Word* goes deeper within the art process itself by taking readers through the story of illuminating the Bible in the modern era. Calderhead enhances the mystique of the artists' product by taking readers into their world of creation.

There are a myriad of challenges to overcome in creating an illuminated work. Those challenges do not diminish in the industrial age; rather, they take different forms. Calderhead reveals much about the struggles in making the Saint John's Bible flourish. The three divisions of the book are intended to be explanations of the areas of creative effort: Part 1, the process; Part 2, the product; and Part 3, the people. But they are also interactions with three types of challenges the artists and sponsors of the project faced. Occasionally there is overlap between the parts, which may appear to be redundant, but if readers push ahead, they find that the author is giving a new and valid perspective to the similar content. This is why the divisions might more clearly be understood as areas of challenge rather than as segments of creation.

How did this group of creatives, scholars, and sponsors decide to produce an illuminated Bible? Answering this question is the focus of Part 1. The process of launching the production of the Saint John's Bible involved seven areas—location, surface, font, layout, theology, paintings, and tools—which the author discusses in eight chapters. The people who became the team for this project had to overcome significant hurdles in these areas. It was not a matter of convincing all parties of the validity of the work. The team had to manage the details of financial, practical, theological, and administrative concerns before launching into such a long-term project. For a



project that takes such a great length of time, money matters have to be settled, for artists and sponsors. When there is no one still living who has created an illuminated Bible, information about the tools, techniques, dimensions, and materials has to be gleaned from historical data and manual attempts. In a post–printing press world, an illuminated text is not considered physically necessary, yet it was determined to be valuable for several spiritual reasons. Length of time was a concern for the project, but so was scale. Illuminating a scripture text involves a host of people and coordination of their many efforts into one product.

Patron and artist had not only to coordinate, but also—as has always been true—to collaborate. One of the most intriguing aspects of *Illuminating the Word* is its excellent description of the delicate relationship between patron and artist. On one side are the artists, led by Donald Jackson. To understand the mind of the artist it is helpful to hear from Jackson. He once scribbled this text during the research phase: “ignition / spark / divinity / divine harmonic / pure quality / all this happens to [an] intellectual but that is quality of an idea / grasp or strives to produce an idea / the artist creates a thing” (83). On the other side, there are groups of scholars and financial backers. The entire project team wanted all the committees to reach consensus, or at least move forward in peace at each junction of decision-making. This meant that the planning stage—which Calderhead calls *The Process*—was the broadest in scope and the slowest in progress. He describes the team during this period as forming “a microcosm of community life, working slowly and sometimes painfully to find the best ways of moving the project forward” (107).

It was not the project team’s desire, however, to see every detail dictated prior to beginning the creative efforts. It was not possible to anticipate everything that might happen. With no living masters to advise the work strategy, the art of illumination had to be rediscovered in form and process. As a team effort, a complex effort, and an artistic effort they had to keep in mind: “Plan everything ahead and the result dies. It becomes sterile” (125). Like the deep color palettes of the final product, art has a living quality.

Part 2 begins a pattern of working through a section of the final product by engaging each illumination panel through the theological considerations and materials in each design. This part gives detailed descriptions of the illuminations: paintings that express the narrative and theological points of the sacred text through a number of techniques, including gold leaf, oil, charcoal, and watercolors. The chapters are presented in chronological order of release, which mirrors the publication order Bible translators often employ.<sup>1</sup> The scholars wanted the full-page illustrations to convey intense theological messages to the audience. Additionally, certain materials posed unique challenges—such as artists having to craft their own tools—which was termed “a utilitarian miscellany” (154).

The illuminations are a marvel to behold, weaving theology and art from the breath of sacred text. One such painting is the frontispiece for the book of Ecclesiastes. Frontispiece illuminations are challenging works because they must convey the theological intent of an entire book of the

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<sup>1</sup> The first time the Bible is translated into a language, the team often follows the pattern of a Gospel book, often John, followed by Acts, and then the creation story found in the Pentateuch.

Bible, not just a single verse or story. At first glance the Ecclesiastes frontispiece appears as though a painter's water cup has been overturned on the page; but the longer you gaze, the more detail is seen. Across two pages, cosmic splashes of color flow around two chapters of text, with layered detail seeping through the illustration's impressions of awe. Butterfly wings, a raven, rainbow staves, and so much color all drip with implied theological meaning. Donald Jackson and Chris Tomlin turn seven pages of textual commentary into representative imagery, as a team of calligraphers dutifully spell out their respective fonts. All illuminations are team efforts whose precise contributors go largely unspecified. The Ecclesiastes frontispiece is a success in its use of modern techniques and style, bringing new insight to readers coming to the table of wisdom.

Part 3 reflects on the completed illumination, Calderhead addresses the individual artists' experiences, the fonts, and displays of the work. All of these challenges are topics that were fully considered only when the art pieces were completed. Readers are treated to interviews with and profiles of the Saint John's Bible artists. In elaborate detail, calligraphers discuss the fonts or scripts used in the work.

A reader who wants to view the completed work has a few options. However, this poses hurdles not just for the caretakers of the product but also for the public. The primary method of accessing the Saint John's Bible is to view the touring display. A second option is to view page images online, but with heavy watermarks.<sup>2</sup> A third option is to purchase a Heritage Edition, which "started at \$115,000 in pre-publication, and the price has risen to \$165,000 over a period of five years" (318). A cheaper option is to buy a seven-volume set of page images for \$450. These details are followed by a heartfelt epilogue in which Calderhead passively addresses some of the concerns implied by such access restraints.

Calderhead has written a good companion to the Saint John's Bible. Reading his book engaged me by the way it balances objectivism and emotive qualities. The text does not suffer from technical issues, but it does raise topics that are not fully addressed by the author. While reading the theological sections, I was distracted by how paradoxical the Saint John's Bible's production can seem. It was spurred on by desires to be inclusive and represent even the most disadvantaged, keeping the tradition's spirit to illuminate the biblical text so that the illiterate poor might grasp the divine truths within. Calderhead's final statement: "but like all great works of art, it is not limited to one specific community. It belongs to all of us" (331). However, paying to see this completed work may not be what ancient illuminators had in mind, and the high price of the Heritage Editions certainly makes the product seem as though it is only for the most advantaged. I understand the reasoning of generating funds for the team members and tours of the work, but the final product feels as though it restricts access when it might not need be so restricted.

This is a book on the making of illumination art, and it would be at home in the classroom or on the coffee table. The three parts of the book—an in-depth look at the logistics of the project, an explanation of the illuminations and their techniques, and profiles of the people involved in the project—invite the reader to a guided tour of the whole project. As a visual catalogue, it pairs high-

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.saintjohnsbible.org>

quality, full-color photos with detailed descriptions of the techniques pictured. It also brings clarity to many of the key aspects of the artists' lives. Any reader wanting to understand illumination will be fully satisfied by Calderhead's book, and scholars seeking ways to catalogue the making of an art form (while communicating to all audiences) will glean important principles here. Similar literature includes the works of Pratapaditya Pal and Timothy Husband, both of whom have created visually stunning catalogues with thorough research on visual artworks from various museum collections.<sup>3</sup> *Illuminating the Word* is a documentary in print as the author strategically draws out the organic drama of unfolding art.

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<sup>3</sup> Pratapaditya Pal, *Art of Nepal: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection* (Berkeley, California: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; University of California Press, 1985); Timothy Husband, *The Art of Illumination: The Limbourg Brothers and the Belles Heures of Jean de France, Duc de Berry* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009).