

Codicological Description Paper

The book I chose to study is a Low German (or Niederdeutsch) Bible dating from 1478 and beautifully illustrated with color woodcuts. It is an incunable, or cradle book, which I would guess weighs approximately 30 pounds. The dimension of its leaves measures 40 x 29cm, and there are some 544 leaves, so it is a very large book. The binding is not original and was perhaps redone sometime in the last 50 years. The pages also show signs of having been restored, most likely at different times over the centuries. It's hard for me to guess, however, when the restoration work might have been done.

This bible was printed in Cologne, where Germany's second oldest university was founded in 1388. Cologne was also the seat of the Catholic Archdiocese until 1525.¹ Nicole Howard writes in her work *The Book: The Life Story of a Technology* that there was a "diaspora"² of printers from Mainz, where printing was invented by Gutenberg. She notes that the archbishop of Mainz and his troops had sacked the city in 1462, which contributed to an unstable business climate. Printers fled the city looking for business opportunities and a stable political environment.³ According to Howard, Cologne was their first destination. The university provided them with a clear market for their books.

¹ Christoph Reske, *Die Buchdrucker des 16. Und 17. Jahrhunderts in deutschsprachigen Werkes von Josef Benzing*. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007) 421.

² Nicole Howard, *The Book: The Life Story of a Technology*. (Westport, CT: The Greenwood Press, 2005) 45.

³ Ibid.

Although this bible lacks a colophon, or a label at the back of the earliest books identifying the printer and place of publication, the Burke Library record designates Heinrich Quentell as the publisher. However, different sources I consulted contend that Bartholomaeus von Unckel was the publisher of the two large Cologne bibles, one of which was in the Lower Saxon dialect, the other in the West Low German dialect. While von Unckel was in fact the publisher, the financing and the printing were likely in the hands of a consortium, whose main financial backer was Johann Helman, the master of the mint for the Kaiser and a Cologne-based notary.⁴ Ferdinand Geldner argues that since it's unlikely that Unckel owned his own printing press, he probably worked with Heinrich Quentell, who was just starting out in the business at the time, to bring out these editions.⁵ Indeed, editor Christoph Reske verifies this fact in his excellent reference guide on early German publishing. Quentell was active as a publisher from 1478-1501 and founded one of the most important publishing dynasties of Cologne, printing, among other things, theological and liturgical texts as well as works for university lectures.⁶ It is fascinating to think that one of Quentell's very first projects was such an ambitious undertaking. For various reasons, these two editions of the Bible must have been expensive and technically challenging.

Howard notes that early bookmaking was highly collaborative. While Gutenberg is the person we associate with inventing the printing press, she writes that “the truth is that a host of craftsmen, with different skills and specialties, were collectively turning the idea of

⁴ Ferdinand Geldner, *Die deutschen Inkulabeldrucker. Erster Band: Das Deutsche Sprachgebiet*. (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1968) 96.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Reske, 423.

printed books into a reality.”⁷ No doubt that a number of highly skilled craftsmen from the compositors to the inkers and pressmen were involved with this Low German Bible.

Howard stresses how one of the characteristics of the incunables (*incunabula* is Latin for cradle) was their high level of craftsmanship. These books, which were published in the first fifty years after Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type, were “still meant to look like high-quality manuscripts.”⁸ My text could certainly be characterized in this way. For example, like Gutenberg’s Bible, this one has large capital letters beginning each chapter that are individually colored, or rubricated, by hand in either red or blue.⁹ Sometimes the letters have lowercase letters in black inside them, perhaps because lowercase letters were more recognizable. Red ink was used to highlight all capital letters in the text, not just the beginnings of sentences **[illustration 1]**.

For me, the most stunning aspect of this bible is its exquisite color woodcuts. Throughout the text are 123 highly detailed color woodcuts, which are placed in different positions on the page and even occasionally on successive pages (back and front)—clear evidence of the painstaking planning of this book. As one would expect, the woodcuts illustrate popular scenes from the Old Testament such as the expulsion from the garden, Moses being found by the Pharaoh’s daughter **[illustration 2]**, and Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. The bulk of the woodcuts are in the Old Testament section, whereas the New Testament only has one woodcut per Gospel depicting the respective Gospel writer holding a writing implement. Each of the epistles of Paul begins with an identical smaller format woodcut that is only one-column wide. There are three places in the text that clearly

⁷ Howard, 34.

⁸ Howard, 43.

⁹ Compare Howard’s description of Gutenberg’s two-column 42-line Bible published in Mainz in 1456 (31).

resemble pages from an illuminated manuscript: the very first page of the volume, a creation scene from Genesis, and then a scene from Revelation, which is close to the end of the volume. All three of these pages have richly illuminated identical borders containing birds, fruit, and cornucopia. At the bottom of the creation scene and Revelation pages there are two figures, presumably Adam and Eve, holding up what appear to be coats of arms, but they haven't been colored in. Interestingly, of all the folio pages in the entire bible, the one of this creation scene shows the most damage. It appears to have been torn and creased and to have water damage. Whoever handled the book must have spent a lot of time studying this page in particular **[illustration 3]**.

It is unclear who the woodcut artist was. Geldner speculates that the drawings were perhaps done by an unknown Dutch artist,¹⁰ but a reference from Oxford's Bodleian Library website states that they were made "by the so-called 'Master of Cologne.'"¹¹ This same source writes that "the decoration in both [Cologne Bible] volumes was hand-colored in a style that influenced all subsequent production, not only in Germany but across Europe."¹² Whatever the wider impact of these illustrations, they are clearly quite detailed and distinctive. Interestingly, the woodcuts were used again just four years after this Cologne printing by prominent Nuremberg-based publisher Anton Koberger for his own High German Bible. According to a short description posted on the online antiquariat bookseller Via Libri showing an illustration from this edition, more recent research indicates that Koberger was likely one of the financiers of the Cologne Bible edition, either directly or through middle men, and as an investor in that project he may have optioned the rights to

¹⁰ Geldner, 98.

¹¹ <http://bav.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/stamp-ross-283>.

¹² Ibid, emphasis added.

the Cologne woodcuts or else he may have bought the woodcuts once the Cologne Bible printing was finished.¹³

Speculations about this Bible's Community

I don't know who might have owned this copy of the Cologne Bible. On account of the fact that it's in the vernacular I imagine that it was located either in a monastery in the region around Cologne or else was owned by some rich person in the city. In any case, it would have been a very expensive purchase, and I'm sure was treated as a work of fine art. As an *incunable* it probably would have been kept in one place on a lectern for reading during worship or group prayer. This edition has commentaries from Nicholas of Lyra, a Franciscan father who was one of the most prominent writers of biblical exegesis during the Middle Ages. Each book of this edition has prefatory remarks taken from his seminal work *Postillae perpetuae in universam S. Scripturam*. Whoever read from this particular Bible would obviously have been literate and probably a cleric.

Paul Saenger points out that the early printed bibles that appeared in Mainz, Bamberg, and Strasbourg weren't intended to replace thirteenth century portable manuscript bibles as the ordinary reference tools of scholars. Instead they were intended to duplicate the appearance of the large bibles that were often chained on public display in the fifteenth century in monastic churches and cathedrals. According to him, these earliest bibles show very few signs of use, including significant private use by scholars. He argues that, "although highly legible, they were in fact infrequently read."¹⁴ Rather, the large, heavy

¹³ See https://www.vialibri.net/item_pg_i/533772-1483-biblia-deutsch-deutsche-bibel-das-buch-thobie-blatt-cxxxiiii-4303.htm.

¹⁴ Paul Saenger, "The Impact of the Early Printed Page on the Reading of the Bible," in Paul Saenger and Kimberly Van Kempen, eds. *The Bible as Book: The First Printed Editions*. (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1999) 32.

volumes produced during the first two decades of the incunable period served the primary function of being “palpable icons of God’s revealed word.”¹⁵ This makes sense given their astounding beauty and craftsmanship.

Similarly, this copy of the Cologne Bible from Burke doesn’t show an enormous amount of usage. In my close examination of its pages, I think I only came across a total of three examples of marginalia, two of which are in the New Testament (Luke 6 and John 21). Of all the books in the Bible, the Gospel of John seems to have the most wear and tear. There are brown splotches on many of the pages. As I mentioned earlier, the striking illustration of the Creation scene from Genesis appears to be the most damaged page in the entire volume. If it was not much of a study bible or one that was used to preach from, I do imagine that it was admired as art and treated as a sacred object. In any case, it’s truly incredible to me that such a book has endured five centuries and continues to retain so many of its original essential qualities.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Bibliography

- Cadegan, Una M. *All Good Books Are Catholic Books*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2013.
- Geldner, Ferdinand, *Die deutschen Inkulabeldrucker. Erster Band: Das Deutsche Sprachgebiet*. Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1968.
- Hacker, Joseph R. and Adam Shear, eds. *The Hebrew Book in Early Modern Italy*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2011.
- Hindman, Sandra, *Text and Image in Fifteenth-Century Illustrated Dutch Bibles*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977.
- Howard, Nicole. *The Book: The Life Story of a Technology*. Westport, CT: The Greenwood Press, 2005.
- O'Sullivan, Orlaith and Ellen N. Herron, *The Bible as Book: The Reformation*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2000.
- Reske, Christoph. *Die Buchdrucker des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts im deutschen Sprachgebiet*. Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz, 2007.
- Rogerson, John, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Bible*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Saenger, Paul and Kimberly Van Kempen, eds. *The Bible as Book: The First Printed Editions*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1999.
- Scribner, Robert W. *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*. London; Ronceverte, WV, U.S.A. : Hambledon Press, 1988.