ILLUSTRATING THE GOSPELS IN ARABIC: BYZANTINE AND ARAB CHRISTIAN MINIATURES IN TWO MANUSCRIPTS OF THE EARLY MAMLÛK PERIOD IN CAMBRIDGE

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Introduction

This contribution considers two little-known Arabic Gospel books in Cambridge University Library, with a view to considering the transfer or ‘translation’ of Gospel illustration from Greek into Arabic. One of the manuscripts, Cambridge University Library MS Gg. 5.33, reuses Greek Gospel illustrations directly. The illustrations of the other, MS Add. 1860, were arguably painted by an Arab Christian artist, absorbing Greek and other eastern Christian traditions at the same time as making the Arabic tradition its own. Here, this Christian Arab tradition of Gospel illustration can be seen to develop in a way that is both related to and differentiated from Islamic decoration of the Qur’an. It can be suggested that the process of transmission of illustration may run on parallel lines to that of the collation of texts, although not necessarily derived from the same manuscripts as the text in any one case. This was at a time, in early Mamlûk Egypt, when there were different versions available. One of the functions of the use of Greek, or Greek-style, illustrations was, I propose, to offer a seal of respectability to the text.

Both manuscripts are included in E.G. Browne’s *Hand-List of the Muhammadan Manuscripts...preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, published in 1900, but the fact that they are both illustrated has escaped notice by art historians.¹ Since the manuscripts are

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¹ E.G. Browne, *A Hand-List of the Muhammadan Manuscripts (including all those written in the Arabic character) preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge, 1900, pp. 11-12 no. 68 (MS Gg. 5.33) and 12 no. 69 (MS Add. 1860). Neither is included in, for example, H. Buchthal and O. Kurz, *A Hand List of Illuminated Oriental Christian Manuscripts*, London, 1942 (repr. Nendeln, Lichtenstein, 1968). I am very grateful to Mrs Jill Butterworth, formerly of the Division of Oriental and Other Languages,
so little known, it is necessary to start with their background, history and description before considering the issues raised by their illustrations.

Both manuscripts have long been known to textual scholars. They were assigned to a ‘miscellaneous’ group (‘HSS mit Evv-Texten unbekannter Herkunft’) by Georg Graf in 1944, whose work built on that of Ignazio Guido in his 1888 classification of Arabic Gospels, since they did not easily fit into those with a definable origin in Greek, Syriac Peshitta, Coptic or other versions translated or collated in Egypt in the thirteenth century. These versions include those of al-‘Asad Ibn al-‘Assāl and the ‘Alexandrian Vulgate’. It has been pointed out, however, that much work needs to be done on the texts of the Arabic versions. This includes the relationship between versions, including that between that of al-‘Assāl and the Alexandrine Vulgate. So, for example, Samir Arbache has suggested that the al-‘Assāl version was essentially the basis for the ‘Alexandrian Vulgate’, which having removed the notes in this version, ‘présenta un texte homogène intégrant les variantes pour constituer une recension éclectique qu'il est convenu d’appeler la “Vulgate alexandrine”’. On the other hand, J. Valentin has emphasized the importance of the existence of the Coptic version existing prior to al-‘Assāl’s version, exemplified in the manuscript in the Vatican Library, MS Vat. Copto 9. The present study contributes to

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Cambridge University Library, for drawing my attention to MS Gg. 5.33 and for facilitating my work in the Library. This work is part of a study in progress by the author of illustrated Christian Arabic manuscripts.


6 J. Valentin, ‘Les évangelaires arabes de la bibliothèque du monastère Ste-Cathec-