CHAPTER 18

Illustrated Byzantine Gospel Books

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Introduction

Over 5,800 textual witnesses to the New Testament have been catalogued, most of which are Gospel books and lectionaries. The Gospels were the most frequently copied text in Byzantium. I will provide an overview of some of the most important developments in illustrated Greek Gospel books between the 6th and the 15th centuries.

Illustrated Gospel Books before Iconoclasm

No illustrated Greek Gospel books can be dated earlier than the 6th century, but there is a great deal of evidence for Gospel images in other media before then. Only two of the approximately 160 Greek New Testament manuscripts

1 According to D. Wallace, the total number of catalogued Greek New Testament manuscripts now stands at 128 papyri, 322 majuscules, 2,926 minuscules, and 2,462 lectionaries, bringing the grand total to 5,838 manuscripts. Some of these are in fragmentary condition; the list expands as new manuscripts are discovered. See <http://www.danielbwallace.com/2013/08/26/latest-greek-new-testament-minuscules-gregory-aland-2916-2925-and-2926/> (accessed 3 February 2014).


that survive from the pre-iconoclastic period are illustrated. These are the Rossano Gospels and the Sinope Gospels. Both are purple parchment fragmentary codices attributed to the 6th century and both are written in majuscule script.

The *Rossano Gospels (Rossano, Museo Diocesano di arte sacra, cod. 1) comprises 188 folios containing the Gospels of Matthew and Mark (up to Mark 16:14). Its uncial script is written in silver ink with gold titles. It was probably once part of a two-volume set of which the second volume does not survive. An incomplete and out of order set of illustrations now occupies the first eight folios of the volume. It includes 12 narrative scenes, ten of which are accompanied by Old Testament prophets. In addition, a decorated circle with bust portraits of the evangelists on fol. 5r likely once served as a frontispiece for a set of Canon Tables. A portrait of Mark (fol. 121r), widely believed to be the only surviving pre-iconoclastic example of an evangelist portrait from a Greek Gospel book, is increasingly recognized as a later insert.

Only 43 folios of the Sinope Gospels (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Par. suppl. gr. 1286) survive containing chapters 7-21 of Matthew. They are written entirely in gold. Five illustrations occupy the bottom of the folios containing their respective Gospel texts. These include the Feast of Herod (fol. 10v), the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish (fol. 11r), the Feeding of the Four Thousand (fol. 15r), the Healing of the Blind Men (fol. 29r), and the Parable of the Fig Tree (fol. 30v). Each scene is framed by two prophets carrying large scrolls with relevant texts from the Old Testament. The illustrations of the Rossano and the Sinope Gospels are stylistically related.

4 Aland/Aland, The Text of the New Testament, p. 81, table 4. This total does not include papyri.
5 See Lowden’s entry on the Rossano Gospels in Oxford Art Online at <http://www.oxfordartonline.com.libproxy.scu.edu/subscriber/article/grove/art/T073968> and Cutler, “Rossano Gospels”. However, two standing and two seated evangelist portraits are found on fols. 9v and 10r in the Rabbula Gospels (*Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Laur. Plut. 1.56), written in Syriac and dated to 586. The Rabbula Gospels also contains 19 pages of canon tables with scenes from the Old and New Testaments. In addition, it contains scenes (fol. 13) of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, and the Ascension which may have been taken from an illustrated Greek Gospel book. See Spier, Picturing the Bible, pp. 276-82.
6 See Spier, Picturing the Bible, pp. 271-5 for catalogue entry and colour illustrations of all scenes except for the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fish.
7 Ibid., p. 271.