James W. Watts (ed.)


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As the editor recounts, *Iconic Books and Texts* emerged from a graduate seminar on scripture held in 2001 at which a participant pointed out the lack of readings and discussion on the forms and functions of the physical books themselves. A series of symposia that sought to fill this gap was subsequently held and resulted in a range of articles that appeared in the journal *Postscripts.* *Iconic Books and Texts* gathers these contributions into a book.

The twenty-two chapters are usefully divided into five thematic parts. The first part focuses on a theoretical approach that helps distinguish iconic texts from other types of handwritten or printed texts. In the first chapter (“The Three Dimensions of Scriptures”), James W. Watts, the editor of the collection, argues that scriptures, unlike secular texts, are ritualized in three dimensions: the semantic, performative, and iconic, with “relic books,” single irreproducible works that are overwhelmingly iconic being the sole exception. William A. Graham (“‘Winged Words’: Scriptures and Classics as Iconic Texts”) distinguishes between classics and scripture. Although each type can be said to be “iconic” because it involves a major religiously or culturally charged object, a “classic” of the scriptural kind stands out because of its ritual, devotional, and liturgical functions; it also has unique sacred and authoritative status. In “Talking about ‘Iconic Books’ in the Terminology of Book History,” Deirdre C. Stam provides a survey of terminology from the antique book trade and the scholarly discipline of book history, explaining terms such as work, text, manuscript, codex, and volume in order to establish a specific, stable, and shared vocabulary across the various disciplines and fields.

Part two considers the imagery of texts, which is so closely tied to their textual iconicity. Dorina Miller Parmenter (“The Iconic Book: The Image of the Bible in Early Christian Rituals”) analyzes the functional equivalency of icons and Bibles in early Christianity, discussing, for example, communal rituals in which the gospel was carried and displayed in a procession, and the popular and private ritual uses of scripture as a miracle-working object, an engagement with the text that parallels the uses and functions of Orthodox portrait icons. In “Images to be Read and Words to be Seen: The Iconic Role of the Early Medieval Book,” Michelle P. Brown shows how Gospel books in various parts of Europe were granted iconic status and in turn established the iconicity of the codex book form. As Brown suggests, the book was, literally, the Word made flesh or, rather, the Word made word (p. 99). In “Looking at Words: The Iconicity of the Page,” S. Brent Plate reminds us that what we see when we
look into books matters, and that not only the textual content, but also style, font, color, lines, typeface, and layout engage us in a particular form of “religious seeing” in which words are images. Zeev Elitzur (“Between the Textual and the Visual: Borderlines of Late Antique Book Iconicity”) argues that in antiquity the iconicity of scripture developed in two directions: the visual for Jewish interpreters was located in the written sign, whereas for Christians the visual was engaged though the image. In “It Is What It Is (Or Is It?): Further Reflections on the Buddhist Representation of Manuscripts,” Jacob Kinnard discusses the role of images of books in medieval Buddhist art, arguing that these images are in effect “sculptural snapshots.” In some instances, the image itself appears to have been venerated, but the image could also be an image of worship, a statement about the book. M. Patrick Graham (“The Tell-Tale Iconic Book”) turns the focus on sixteenth-century Europe and looks at the relationship between images of books and biblical interpretation, noting, for example, the varied ways images of books within texts were tied into understandings of that text. Such depictions might be used as an indication of scriptural authorship, to demonstrate status or orthodoxy, or as a bridge between the ancient and contemporary worlds.

Part three deals with behavior in relation to the iconic book as physical object. Natalia K. Suit (“Muṣḥaf and the Material Boundaries of the Qur’an”) looks at the muṣḥaf, the term for the physical object that is the Qur’an, seeking to establish how materiality and message are entwined. Suit notes that the Qur’an is handled differently from other objects — for example, although it can be used as an amulet for protection from robbery, it must not be marked with saliva from page turning or employed as a pillow — but that permissible forms of engagement with the muṣḥaf are also contested. Timothy Beal (“The End of the Word as We Know It: The Cultural Iconicity of the Bible in the Twilight of Print Culture”) then sets cultural iconicity against textual iconicity as he explores the decline of the written word and the emergence of “evangelical capitalism,” bringing attention to a new plurality that includes Biblezines, manga Bibles, and niche Bibles, such as the Golfer’s Bible. Dorina Miller Parmenter’s second contribution, titled “Iconic Books from Below: The Christian Bible and the Discourse of the Duct Tape,” sets ancient iconic bejewelled gospels against the worn and disintegrating Bible, which is understood as more than simply an exhausted print. Taped together, such Bibles are a reminder that God “heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.” In “Be-Witching Scripture: The Book of Shadows as Scripture within Wicca/Neopagan Witchcraft,” Shawn Loner demonstrates through a descriptive analysis of Witchcraft the potential for the Book of Shadows to be understood as scripture, not only because of its