Thirteenth Century Moralized Bible: A means to Refute Secular Teachings

One of the most highlighted periods in France was the era of 13th century where religious and social upheavals occurred. During this period, France boosts itself as a social and cultural entity following the emergence of the Capetian France. It was known to be the expansion phase because of the growing population and the expansion of territory controlled by the French kings.1 Ironically, 13th century period became a turning point to other history icons because of their accomplishments during this time. In terms of art history this period was marked by decorative arts largely dominated by church art.2 Doubtless, this period was characterized by the power of church in all aspects of the people’s lives.

This paper aims to discuss the different notions of the moralized bible and further explains the contemporary issues regarding this masterpiece. It also aims to explore how are moralized bibles reflective of religious scholars’ attempts to refute the increasing spread of classical and secular teaching in order to win royal patronage and support for their organizations and ideas in 13th century France. This paper included five examples of moralized bible carefully analyzed in order to see the purpose of the religious scholars who made these. As a matter of fact, the moralized bible is also called Speculum Principis which literary means Mirror of Princes. Contemporary scholars think that the royal family members were among the recipients of the work.3

1_________. “Medieval France: the Capetian Cycle (1150–1450)”
Moralized Bible Defined:

Contemporary scholars have defined this term and converged to some ideas. According to Tachau, moralized bible or the bible moralisée is a “type of illustrated book conceived in the early 13th century, that presents visual and paraphrases combined with illustrated commentaries that provide moral, allegorical and anagogical interpretations.” She further argued that this is the most complete and systematic visual exegesis of the Bible produced during the Middle Ages. Other authors described this as large manuscripts which is illuminated with around five thousand roundels and accompanied by short texts. The moralized bible looks like a typical bible, except that it has a bible illustration and a bible commentary (not bible texts alone) which appears side by side. Although there were surviving moralized bible written in French, most of them were written in Latin. The bible text passage found in the bible is explained by a commentary whereas the bible illustration is completed with explanatory and moralizing illustration. It is so common to see miniatures in bright colors and composed into medallions. Records show that the four earliest examples of moralized bibles are the following: Vienna 2554, Vienna 1179, Toledo-New York Moralized Bible and Oxford-Paris-London Moralized bible. They were all made in Paris, France and dated as early as the first half of thirteenth century. We can draw from the definitions above that a moralized bible is a well-balanced masterpiece of texts and pictures. These are considered to be royal manuscripts which had a dynastic significance; queens of France played a crucial role in making these.

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Moralized bible influenced other religious work in order to gain royal patronage. To do this, they simply depict their overarching themes - the idea of royalty. For example the *North French Miscellany* (see Fig. 1) which shows King David playing a harp is a 13th century French manuscript written in Hebrew but perceived to be illuminated by Christian artists. This work depicted the image of David as a crowned king, wearing a bright red cloak lined with royal ermine seated in a golden chair and playing a “kinor” – a type of harp we often read in the Hebrew Bible. Instead of depicting him as a shepherd or as a young boy prior of becoming a king, he is illuminated as someone who has reached the highest rank in the society. Evidently seen is the idea of royalty being promoted in this manuscript.

The first moralized bible to be analyzed is the “*God as Geometer*” an image found in Vienna 2554. This was made in order to interpret biblical texts accompanied by a beautifully painted medallion that offers a visual commentary. In a study conducted by Raeppele (the style, tradition, iconography, patronage, and historical context of this moralized bible), Vienna codex 2554 appears to use biblical passages while creating a strong hierarchy representation and resemblances of the particular world order of 13th French century society. Scholars thought that it was likely that a member or members of the Capetian family were initiators of the Vienna 2554 since the text seems to respond to the religious, intellectual and political context of 13th century France. According to records, it particularly shows the volatile time of change for the Catholic Church because of the rise of a scholarly guild at the University in Paris who was eager to defend their privileges such as exemptions from reprisals and special judicial protection.

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8 ______________. “North French Miscellany, Northern France”. (The British Library Board).
God as Geometer (see Fig. 2) partly depicts the story of creation found in the book of Genesis. It shows the figure of God holding a compass in his hand and trying to create the world. Also, in the fourth roundel of figure 3, there was a mean looking figure which threatens the Church with a dagger which represents the Jews. Succeeding roundels show the pictures of birds which reveal the people tearing down at the Church and big fishes eating small fishes. This represents the money lenders who took advantage with the poor. In other words, those scribes and illuminators who made this bible simply portray the non-Christian deeds of people who were mostly enemies of the Church.

The second moralized bible is the Vienna 1179 and believed to be made for Louis VIII before the year of his death in 1226. Unlike the first moralized bible, this was written in Latin which according to Lowden, an attempt to surpass the Vienna 2554 in terms of its standard and length. Unlike the other moralized bibles, this is a single volume bible which likely closely related with Vienna 2554. For example, Deuteronomy begins in Vienna 1179 as it does in Vienna 2554. Although this is a work cited mostly by bible passages, Lowden still argued that the text does not represent the bible because of the clumsy texts put into it. One image entitled the First Four Days of Creation was adapted from the story of creation found in the book of Genesis. We can see a lot of interpretations in this moralized bible because it explicitly shows and depicts the “dangerous” icons to be avoided in the society as seen in the earlier bible. In Figure 4 for example, it depicts the picture of Israelites who rejected the manna for carnal
nourishment. The succeeding roundels showed the growing immorality of the people such as lust, covetousness and usury, as revealed in the text.

One of the most famous moralized bibles being recorded was the Toledo moralized bible with the following images *Louis IX’s Psalter* (also known as *Louis XI, Blanche of Castile, A Cleric, and an Artist* because it was generally accepted that the picture represents Blanche of Castile and the young Louis IX) composed after 1255. This bible made for Louis IX the Saint has been known for centuries under the name of Bibliarica (“rich Bible”) for its luxury decoration. Apparently, it was transferred to Toledo during the lifetime of the King (1226–1270) and has been kept in the Pierpont Library in New York since 1906. There were eight folios taken out for unknown reasons in the 16th century.

Scholars have said that the Church was against the idea of astronomy or the science of the stars. This is probably because Middle Ages was characterized by a period where people start to ask questions or in other words become curious of their world. Prior to this, the Church served as the sole source of knowledge because of their knowledge with the word of God. With the establishment of schools and universities, the Church had seen the threat of secularism in the French society. Hence, Figure 5 which appeared in Toledo moralized bible depicts a picture of astronomers. Christian theologians would go against to their idea that stellar movements influence humankind. This could be a source of blasphemy for it disregards the idea of God intervening to the course of humankind.

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13 Ibid. 15.
14 Ibid.
There were also images which show a colophon picture of a king and a queen (Fig. 6), thus making the scholars to conclude that the bible’s target audiences were the royal readers. It also shows Louis and his mother accompanied by a busy monk and scribe. They were surrounded by such luxury as gold background and a stained-glass design scheme, thus uplifting the idea not only of royalty but also of religion and of scholarship in unique artistic hybrid. But one thing peculiar to this work is the image of Judas plotting with the Jews priests rather than the Jews plotting as shown in Figure 7. This part suggests that that the image of Judas plotting with the Jewish priests is the on-going scenario of the French society. With the advent of secularism, Jews were conceived by the Church as a group who appears to be their enemy because they are in league with the anti-Christ.

The last example is the Oxford-Paris-London Moralized bible published in four massive plate volumes with a short volume of commentary. In a recent study conducted by Professor Lowden, he claimed that the artist of the said bible must have wielded the stylus with a very strong pressure. For him, this bible is a hasty and inaccurate explanation of the Toledo as it was completed alongside the latter. Since it is in series of volumes, there were many images depicted in the said bible. In Figure 8, the image entitles The Tower of Babel, adapted from the story of Babel in the Old Testament shows the ambitious dealings of humankind to be in equal with God. It is not far from the idea of astronomy where man tends to be on top of the world, overlooking the creations of God. In the end, it will show that they will not prosper for God will impede them by giving out punishment.

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15 Ibid. 35.
16 Ibid.
Conclusion

Understanding the 13th century moralized bible is not easy because we are also confronted with language barrier problem. Most texts in moralized bible were written in Latin. And since Latin is already a dying language, we cannot have a full grasp to understand this unless we have enough background and knowledge with philology, iconography and the history of art. These works were written in bilingual texts, in Latin and in French, accompanied by pictures. From here alone, we can already derive issues like the problem of translation. Authors who have studied these works claimed that the French translation in the bible do not exactly translate the texts in Latin. 18

Critics said that the illuminators and scribes who made these enjoyed a certain amount of freedom because they were able to insert their own opinion in certain texts and commentaries. During this period, the Church still holds the most powerful position not only in religious aspect but in political aspect as well. We should not be surprised, therefore, to see that moralized bible does not only propagate the word of God found in the bible but it also comment on contemporary society and support certain views and ideas. As a matter of fact, contemporary scholars Sarah Lipton, Gerald Guest and J.M. Heinlen claimed that the target audiences of the ideas being promoted by the moralized bible were the Capetians. 19 On the other hand, another scholar claimed that a specially assembled team in the 13th century who probably works with the queen and not in a monastic scriptorium made these. 20 Although there were no specific names for those who made these, it is still generally believed nowadays that the theologians or religious scholars

19 Ibid. 34.
were the brains who set up moralized bibles in order to get the support of the Capetian royalty because of the on-going spread of classical and secular ideas which were obviously a threat to the power of the Church.

The idea that moralized bible was being manipulated and interpreted by religious scholars for the purpose of refuting the on-going spread of classical and secular teachings is unquestionable. Remember that during this time, the royal family should make an effort to preserve the status quo. To be allied with the most powerful institution, the Church, is beneficial to both the royal family and the Church itself. Evidences showed that the Church had successfully got the support of the Capetian royalty. For example, it was remembered that during the year 1211, Aristotle’s texts, an example of classical works, were burned in Paris. On the other hand, the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX were entered into Canon Law. The scriptures were only to be understood by the clergy because it set off a struggle of power between the secular and religious authority.21 Also, during the Lateran Council 1215, an attempt to organize the body of believers through regulations, intended to control moral actions in the personal lives of Christians. One of the most important reformations of the canonical law was when the Church required regular confessions. The codification of the sacrament of penance shows the effective control of the Church over the Christian population.

Scholars who studied the moralized bible diverged in explaining the purpose of why these were written. Some argue that these were not religious works because it also aims to protect the royal family during the 13th century but some argue that it is definitely a religious piece of work because it served as a moral teaching and provide biblical commentary. Given the divergence, moralized bible is being studied because it becomes a very good source of our

21Ibid. 3.
historical and religious thought. It may argue that these were not works of theologians since it stands outside all norms of medieval book production, but surely it is a work of art.

Picture can speak for itself. This means to say that one has the tendency to understand the whole thought of an idea if it is represented by pictures. Thus, it can communicate with us with or without texts to explain on it. Thirteenth century France, although there were already attempts to formalize education, was also characterized by population who do not entirely read or write. We must note that during the medieval age, people are fond of listening to recitation rather than reading. The authors of the moralized bible have perceived that listening was an important process rather than reading. This process allows you to see the text in your memory as if they were mental images. It is through this process that memory provided the structural organization in which the sacred text was brought to mind. “The process of memorization, enhanced by sensation and aided in the organization was thought to allow human beings to perceive something appearing in mere thought to be contemplated as analogous to what was seen in the presentation.”

References:

__________. “Medieval France: the Capetian Cycle (1150–1450)”.

___________. “North French Miscellany, Northern France”. (The British Library Board).


\[Raeppl. 5.\]

\[Ibid.\]


Figure 1. North French Miscellany, Northern France, c.1278–98.
David playing the harp

Source:
http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/frenchmisc_lg.html
Figure 2. God as Geometer as shown in Vienna 2554. God striding forth with compass in his hand and creating the world.

Source: http://www.bookdepository.com/Bible-Moralisee-Gerald-Guest/9781872501925
Figure 3. God as Geometer in Vienna 2554. The fourth roundel shows a man with a dagger.

Figure 4. A picture shown in Vienna 1179.

Source: Tachau, Katherine. God’s Compass and VanaCuriositas: Scientific Study in the Old French Bible Moralisee
**Figure 5.** Toledo Moralized Bible image of astronomers.

*Source: Tachau. 1998.*
Figure 6. Toledo Moralized Bible image of king and queen.

Figure 7. Toledo Moralized Bible shows the image of Judas plotting with the Jews and the destruction of Judas’ sons.

Figure 8. The Tower of Babel found in Oxford-Paris-London Moralized Bible.