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A Material History of the Bible, England 1200–1553 by Eyal
Poleg (review)

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Manuscript Studies: A Journal of the Schoenberg Institute for
Manuscript Studies, Volume 6, Number 2, Fall 2021, pp. 374–378
(Review)



Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mns.2021.0012>

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volume inarguably helps meet that need and will inspire further critical growth.

Eyal Poleg. *A Material History of the Bible, England 1200–1553*. Oxford: for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2020, xxxiv + 227 pp, 44 color illustrations. \$90. ISBN: 9780197266717.

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AS BONNIE MAK OBSERVES in *How the Page Matters* (University of Toronto Press, 2011, 21), “the page is . . . an interface, standing at the centre of the complicated dynamic of intention and reception; it is the material manifestation of an ongoing conversation between designer and reader.” Eyal Poleg’s British Academy Monograph is a richly contextualized and nuanced investigation into designers’ and readers’ contributions to the materiality of the page and the book through Bibles produced for the English market from the early thirteenth century to the end of the reign of Edward VI. The study brings out a wealth of precisely documented material evidence from handwritten and printed Bibles to show how their producers and users engaged with and responded to the ongoing religious and technological changes. A central argument is that such engagements tell a more complex story of the Bible in England during this period than the dominant narratives focusing on dichotomies between tradition vs. reform and orthodoxy vs. heterodoxy. As Poleg puts it, “biblical books were produced by artisans, traders and administrators, whose interests extended from religious piety, through commercial viability and technical capabilities, to political and financial gains. These books were then taken up by readers who were not always sure how to read them, and often did not adhere to the intentions of reformers, priests or monarchs in this matter” (xxiv). For Poleg, “these moments unfold cracks in the grand narratives . . . which are often the most revealing in the history of the Bible; the places where we can see the complex and uncertain course of change” (xxv).

The book is structured around five main chapters framed by an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction lays out a convincing case for the rationale of the study and describes the methods and primary sources used. Instead of examining the transformation of the biblical text itself, which has been a major topic in earlier histories of the English Bible, Poleg focuses on measurable physical features of the book, elements of the page layout, and various textual and visual “addenda” by producers and users in individual copies or editions. The array of features addressed in the volume is impressive: the physical dimensions and weight of the book; thickness of the writing support; bibliographic format; width of margins; presence and form of chapter numbers and subdivisions, running titles, and rubrics; annotations and manicules; title pages and prefaces; tables of lections and other liturgical navigational aids; script and typography; use of color; and so on. Poleg pays attention to both what is unique or idiosyncratic and what represents a more widespread usage. He highlights the importance of subtle changes, the detection of which is enabled by the close comparative scrutiny adopted throughout the book.

The primary sources consist of a formidable body of English Bibles. The manuscripts surveyed for the study include more than one hundred copies of post-1200 Latin Bibles made or used in England (ch. 1, “The Late Medieval Bible: Beyond Innovation”) and a considerable number of the more than 250 copies of the Wycliffite Bible, with a focus on the holdings of Cambridge libraries (ch. 2, “Wycliffite Bibles and the Limits of Orthodoxy”). The manuscripts actually cited in the book include eighty-two items (see “Manuscript Index”). For the printed Bibles, Poleg has “surveyed all major and minor reprints of single-volume Bibles in England and/or in English between 1535 and 1553” (xxvii). This includes comparisons between individual extant copies of the key editions discussed in chapter 3 (“The First Printed English Bible(s),” focusing especially on Thomas Berthelet’s Bible from 1535), chapter 4 (“The Great Bible as a Useless Book”), and chapter 5 (“Into Fast Forward: The Bibles of Edward VI”). In addition to single-volume Bibles, the discussion also features New Testaments and other part-Bibles, especially in chapters 2 and 3.

While the five main chapters each focus on “key moments in the history of the English Bible over three and a half centuries” (xxxii), there are many insightful cross-references between them that, together with the conclusion

(182–92), ensure that the book reads as a coherent whole. Thematic threads running through the chapters include especially the relationship between the Bible and liturgy, with regard to how features of layout and navigational signposting, together with parabiblical textual addenda, were employed by producers and readers to facilitate liturgical applications of their Bibles. Here Poleg examines, for example, tables of lections that helped readers find the biblical passages chanted/read in the church service. He also surveys the materiality of the Psalms as “the site of competing mnemonics, in which two parallel systems of knowledge collided: one liturgical, vocal and musical, in which the Psalms were identified by their opening words; the other scholastic and visual, in which the Psalms were known by their numerical value” (72). As Poleg shows, fluctuations and permutations between these systems are conveyed by the headings/rubrics, running titles, and layout of the Psalms in Bibles throughout the 350-year period investigated. Important findings here include, for example, the identification of a group of Late Medieval Bibles with English mendicant provenance that break new ground by numbering the Psalms and also otherwise employing new retrieval systems (25–38 and appendix 1, “Innovative LMBs”). Paying attention to verbal and visual features that link Bibles with liturgy also serves to highlight “the cohabitation of Latin and English” in these books, which Poleg sees as “a clear manifestation of the need to re-imagine the division between reform and conservatism in England” (184).

Poleg’s close and contextually sensitive attention to the material features of the surveyed Bibles produces several new discoveries concerning their users and contexts of use. The style of the leather tabs pasted in a Wycliffite Bible (New Testament) in Sidney Sussex College Cambridge, for example, allows him to associate the book with Syon Abbey (61–62), as part of a broader discussion about the use of biblical texts in nunneries and other less explored liturgical contexts that brought together Latin and English. The precise measurements of the tabs recorded in note 58 on page 62 testify to Poleg’s overall care in recording such evidence in footnotes and appendices (appendix 2, “Editions of the Great Bible in the Reign of Henry VIII”; appendix 3, “Single-Volume Bibles Printed in the Reign of Edward VI”). Digital subtraction, based on an algorithm developed by Graham Davis, is applied successfully to reveal annotations in English hidden under a pasteover

in a Lambeth Palace Library copy of Bertehelet's Latin Bible (108–15). Overall, Poleg's systematic attention to readers' annotations highlights the importance of manuscript studies methods also in the study of the printed Bibles and reminds the reader about the value of the "archeological" approach he adopts to "virtually 'peel' away the layers" (111) of material evidence.

A study that spans more than three centuries and addresses both handwritten and printed books associated with a variety of historical contexts of production and use could be susceptible to criticism for shallowness or simplification. This is, however, not the case for the present study. Poleg's work is to be commended for its excellent, up-to-date command of previous scholarship on the English Bibles investigated in the five chapters of the book. All this is carefully recorded in the ample footnotes, also including references to important but little-known doctoral dissertations and private communications with other researchers. The author also reminds us about the need to avoid insularity and consider the wider Continental perspective to understand the materiality of the English Bibles (cf. "The history of the English Bible is . . . a unique local phenomenon that cannot—and should not—be separated from its wider counterparts," xxx). This strand could have been pursued in even more detail.

The book contains forty-four high-quality color images (photographs). These figures are integrated competently with the text to support the author's argumentation, including informative captions. In the captions, specifying the biblical book and chapter shown in the figure would have been a helpful addition. Readers less familiar with specific liturgical, theological, or book historical terminology are served by a glossary of thirty-one items (xviii–xx). A wider readership is also served by the decision to modernize the Middle and Early Modern English quotations (xvii). Providing the reader also with the original quotations, however, would have been in line with the systematic and careful practice followed elsewhere in recording the material evidence.

Eyal Poleg's erudite work is an important and innovative contribution to the history of the English Bible. It successfully brings together the study of manuscripts and printed Bibles in a framework that closely attends to layers of material evidence. This evidence reveals complex ways in which producers and readers engaged with their books for a variety of sometimes conflicting

theological or commercial motives. Extending the focus to previously little-studied later copies and subsequent reprints/editions is a major strength of the book.

Federico Botana. *Learning Through Images in the Italian Renaissance: Illustrated Manuscripts and Education in Quattrocento Florence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 340 pp. Hardback, \$100; eBook, \$80. ISBN: 9781108856898.

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IN *LEARNING THROUGH IMAGES in the Italian Renaissance*, Federico Botana focuses on four vernacular works much read in fifteenth-century Florence: the *Fior di Virtù*, a Sienese translation of Aesop's fables, Goro Dati's *La Sfera*, and *libri d'abaco*, compilations of mathematical problems. Scholars have associated the popularity of these works with their educational purposes, and Botana supports this link by gathering the available evidence and discussing how young Florentines learned through them the basics of good citizenship and trade. The *Fior* taught the virtues worth pursuing in both personal and civic relations. Aesop's fables—in which animals have human anxieties and demeanors—offered cautionary tales and standards of social life. Dati's poem made complex views about the cosmos available to those who could not read Latin, merging them with practical information on navigation, such as distances between Mediterranean harbors. Finally, the *libri d'abaco* taught the proportional theorems that were at the very core of commerce and artisanal making.

All the manuscripts that Botana discusses, including quite a few that do not fall within the four typologies outlined above, include illustrations. Large and whimsical and full of unusual details, the drawings constitute the most surprising features of these didactic manuals. They also represent