Macklin Bible Illustrations

Introduction

The Macklin Bible was a major publication project of the late eighteenth century. Between 1791 and 1800, London printseller Thomas Macklin (1752/53–1800) published a six-volume large-format (folio, approx. 430 × 370 mm) Bible with seventy full-page plates and 113 head and tailpieces for individual biblical books. Both the full-page plates and the vignettes include apocalyptic and millenarian subjects.

The full-page plates were engraved by fashionable printmakers after paintings by contemporary artists, most of which were specially commissioned by Macklin for the project and displayed in annual exhibitions at his print shop between 1790 and 1796. All but two of the head- and tailpiece vignettes were designed by Philip James de Loutherbourg (1740–1812), who was the dominant figure in the project as a whole. Containing 183 original illustrations as well as a bespoke typeface and an elaborate dedication page addressed to King George III by the calligrapher Thomas Tomkins (1743–1816), the Bible was an ambitious production.

The Macklin Bible was one of several projects in late eighteenth-century London wherein printsellers commissioned paintings of literary subjects, exhibited them at their premises, and sold engravings, and/or editions of the relevant text including the engravings, after the paintings by subscription. These 'literary galleries' sought both to be commercial printselling projects for the proprietors and to foster British history (i.e. narrative) painting, aligning with the ambitions of the Royal Academy (est. 1768) to encourage a native school of painting in this genre. Macklin began his venture into this model of combining patronage and publishing with his Poets' Gallery, which opened at his Pall Mall shop in 1788 and exhibited subjects from British poetry, which were reproduced as engravings. In 1789, Macklin issued a prospectus, explaining that from the following year he would exhibit scripture pictures, which would be reproduced in 'a magnificent Bible' (Macklin 1789, title). Scripture pictures appeared at Macklin's exhibitions from 1790 until his gallery closed in 1796. The engravings for the Bible were published between 1791 and 1800.

Macklin died in 1800, shortly before the final engravings for the Old and New Testament were published; his wife and business partner, Hannah Macklin (d. 1808), saw the project to completion. Macklin had intended to publish a seventh volume—the Apocrypha—in the same format, a project which was taken up by the publishers Cadell and Davies and completed in 1816. Cadell also reissued the Old and New

Testaments in a condensed format in 1824. This article is concerned with the six-volume Old and New Testaments published by Thomas Macklin.

Apocalyptic and Millenarian Themes in Late Eighteenth-Century British Art

Apocalyptic and millenarian themes were widespread across a range of cultural phenomena in Britain in the late eighteenth century. Events such as the Lisbon earthquake (1755) and the American (1775–83) and French (1789–99) Revolutions were interpreted as foreshadowing the imminent coming of the Apocalypse. Figures such as Joanna Southcott (1750–1814) and Richard Brothers (1757–1824) were proclaimed harbingers of the end of the world and gathered followers who supported and promoted their claims. Biblical exegetes of all denominations were fascinated by biblical books such as Daniel and Revelation. In the art world, history painters including Benjamin West (1738–1820) and John Hamilton Mortimer (1740–79) exhibited such biblical subjects at venues including the Society of Artists and the Royal Academy annual exhibitions. (West contributed to the Macklin Bible, but not any apocalyptic pictures.) That artists produced and found a market for large-scale paintings of apocalyptic biblical subjects in this period reflects not only the cultural prevalence of apocalyptic themes and expectation just noted, but also the potential of such visionary subjects for sublime compositions. The latter fashion was influenced by Edmund Burke's (1729–97) treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and the enduring appeal of Revelation's rich imagery for visual artists.

Macklin and His Artists

There is no known body of papers relating to Macklin and therefore relatively little is known about his motivations for the project beyond what he professed in a 1789 prospectus launching the project and in introductions to the catalogues for his annual exhibitions. In art historical literature, Macklin's project is generally presented as a straightforward iteration of the literary gallery model that flourished in this period, with the Bible as simply another text to be illustrated, like the English poets or Shakespeare. The weight of evidence supports this theory, but it is also worth noting that in his 1789 prospectus Macklin presented his project in traditions both of great illustration and of arts inspired by the Bible. Not only does he ask: 'While every work of consequence in our language has been superbly decorated, who does not regret that the Book of God is to this day but poorly ornamented?' But he also states that 'the benign genius of Revelation has furnished an inexhaustible fund of the richest materials for all the elegant arts' and that 'from this immense storehouse of the best materials' he will publish '*the best edition of the* best of books' (Macklin 1789, v). However, nothing is known of Macklin's own religious convictions beyond such general sentiments that the Bible is revelation, which appear in his exhibition catalogues as well as in the prospectus.

Likewise, little is known about how and by whom individual biblical subjects were selected for inclusion as illustrations. From scattered evidence in the artists' correspondence, and considering the uneven distribution of illustrations throughout the Bible (even accounting for traditional bias towards narrative subjects such as the Gospels), it is probable that the artists had a say in the subjects that they contributed, rather than Macklin having masterminded an illustrative scheme. Therefore, the inclusion of apocalyptic

and millenarian subjects in the Macklin Bible should be seen as arising from the cultural milieu described above as well as the preferences of the individual artists, rather than as part of an overarching conceptual scheme of images conceived by Macklin.

As noted above, Loutherbourg was the dominant artist in the project, and he likewise contributed the most apocalyptic and millenarian illustrations. Without Loutherbourg's involvement in the project, the Bible would have been very different, and would probably have had far fewer images relevant to the present topic. While little is known about Macklin's religious convictions, Loutherbourg was a prominent proponent of alchemy, mysticism, and the occult. He had taken a break from painting in the late 1780s to devote himself exclusively to his spiritual interests, travelling to Europe with the Italian freemason Count Cagliostro (1743–95). Loutherbourg had returned to England when he fell out with Cagliostro, and set up a faith-healing practice with his wife, Lucy, at their London home, where reportedly they healed two thousand patients through 'heavenly and divine influx' between Christmas 1788 and July 1789 (Pratt 1789, 1, 7). At about this time, Loutherbourg became involved in the Macklin Bible, for which he painted sixteen pictures for the full-page plates and designed 111 of the 113 head- and tailpiece vignettes. More than those of any other contributing artist, Loutherbourg's spiritual interests are evident in his designs for the Bible, especially in the vignettes.

A set of explanations of the vignettes appeared in the 1824 reissue of the Macklin Bible published by Cadell. These notes are signed by John Landseer (1769–1852), who had engraved many of the vignettes and had thus worked closely with Loutherbourg on these prints. It is evident in Landseer's comments that he had discussed at least some of the plates with Loutherbourg, although elsewhere Landseer acknowledged that he had struggled to decipher the symbolism. Nevertheless, these notes are helpful for interpreting Loutherbourg's vignettes. For the full-page plates by Loutherbourg and others, the symbolism can only be interpreted based on the images themselves and known information about the artists, and therefore other artists will be introduced here in the discussion of individual images.

Apocalyptic and Millenarian Images

The apocalyptic and millenarian images in the Macklin Bible fall broadly into four types, which will shape the following discussion: visions, destruction, beasts, and herald figures.

Visions

Apocalyptic visions in the books of Daniel and Revelation as well as the proto-apocalyptic Ezekiel are among the most widespread apocalyptic subjects in art, and all three books in the Macklin Bible include such images among the full-page plates.

In Daniel, William Artaud (1763–1823) turned his hand to *Belshazzar's Feast* (exh. 1792, not extant; engr. 1796), and William Hamilton (1751–1801) depicted *Daniel's Vision* (exh. 1795, not extant; engr. 1796). *Belshazzar* is an oddity in the repertoire of Artaud, who was primarily a portrait painter, and was probably included in the Bible project because he was a friend of Macklin. His other subjects for the Bible were more domestic and did not require him to stray too far from his forte. His *Belshazzar* is less successful: it is essentially a domestic scene of a group of figures in pseudo-oriental dress sitting at a table, with a small

vision of the handwriting in Hebrew in the top right-hand corner. No particular apocalyptic or millenarian message is apparent in Artaud's handling of the subject; he probably approached it as a scene like any other. Similarly, Hamilton's *Daniel's Vision* is not a very imaginative take on Daniel's vision of the angel Gabriel. The spectral angel reflects a contemporaneous trend for subjects such as witches and apparitions, inspired by the gothic, and Hamilton may simply have chosen the subject in order to turn his hand to this fashionable genre.

Revelation features three full-page plates: *St John's Vision* (1796, private collection, UK; engr. 1797) by Henry Fuseli (1741–1825) and two by Loutherbourg: *The Vision of the White Horse* (1798, Tate; engr. 1800) and *The Binding of Satan* (exh. 1792, Yale Center for British Art; engr. 1797). Fuseli's picture was a late addition to the project, commissioned by Macklin under pressure from the artist. Fuseli was renowned for painting visionary and spectral subjects and might have been an obvious candidate to contribute to Macklin's project. However, Macklin probably realized that Fuseli was the author of an anonymous critical review of Macklin's Poets' Gallery and did not plan to include the artist in his project (see Bentley 2016, 50–56). *St John's Vision* is Fuseli's only picture for the Bible, and, like Hamilton's *Daniel*, is a product of the fashion for the supernatural. Loutherbourg's *Vision of the White Horse* derives its protagonist from West's *Death on a Pale Horse* (1796, Detroit Institute of Arts), set in a backdrop of storm clouds that is characteristic of Loutherbourg's biblical landscapes. His *Binding of Satan* takes place in a similar setting, with the Archangel Michael wrangling Satan, represented as a monstrous serpent-man-skeleton figure. This subject had also been handled by West (1777, Trinity College, Cambridge), whose composition probably informed Loutherbourg's, but the latter's Satan is more monstrous, reflecting the influence of the gothic sublime.

In Ezekiel, Loutherbourg depicted *Ezekiel's Vision* (exh. 1796, not extant; engr. 1796), showing the [prophet](#) in a stormy landscape beholding a four-winged, four-faced cherub—the visible faces are man, eagle, and ox. The same figure appears in Loutherbourg's headpiece to the book (1796), where the faces of the man, eagle, and lion are visible.

The headpieces to Daniel and Revelation also depict apocalyptic visions. That for Daniel (1797) depicts the eagle-winged lion that the [prophet](#) sees in his vision (Daniel 7:3–4), and that for Revelation (1800?) represents the angel ascending from the east with the seal of the living God (Revelation 7:2).

Destruction

As noted above, Burke's 1757 treatise on the sublime was a key influence on the proliferation of dramatic subjects in British painting in the late eighteenth century. The 1790s context of war in Europe further heightened artists' interests in such subjects. The sublime had a particular impact in the genre of landscape painting, with a flourishing of paintings of rugged landscapes and brooding skies. Loutherbourg's brush had focused on this genre in the 1780s, and for the Macklin Bible he painted several subjects that enabled him to bring together his experience in landscape painting and his spiritual interests. Most relevant here is *The Deluge* (exh. 1790, V&A; engr. 1797), which brings together a typical Loutherbourgian storm-scape with a gothic tableau of distraught figures (compare Fuseli's *Dido*, 1781, Yale Center for British Art) stranded on a rock amid rising flood waters. Loutherbourg also depicted *Noah's Sacrifice* (exh. 1790, not extant; engr. 1794), which appeared the same year as *The Deluge*, suggesting that Loutherbourg conceived the pictures of the destruction wreaked by the flood and of Noah's thanksgiving for its receding together. Thus, unlike his other scenes of storms and destruction in the

Macklin Bible, here we see the new world after the destruction.

There are several other scenes of destruction by Loutherbourg in the full-page plates, and the theme of destruction appears in the vignettes. For example, the headpiece to Samuel is 'the destroying angel, who smote Israel with a pestilence, as mentioned in ch xxiv. ver. 16' (Landseer 1824a, 3); the tailpiece to 1 Kings shows 'the holocaust of Elijah consumed by supernatural fire, as related in ch. xviii. ver 38' (Landseer 1824a, 3); and the headpiece to 2 Peter represents cosmic destruction, depicting the sun and planets bursting into flame, as prophesied in 3:10 of the Epistle.

Beasts

Several monstrous beasts appear in Loutherbourg's vignettes, including the headpiece to Jude, which Landseer explains 'is one of those manacled angels of darkness, which "kept not their first state," as we are informed in the 5th verse, and which are reserved "unto the judgement of the great day"' (1824b, 4). Other beasts in Loutherbourg's vignettes probably have similar meanings. As seen in the above discussion of Loutherbourg's Satan, such figures reflect the contemporaneous fashion for gothic horror in art. However, one of Loutherbourg's beasts in particular merits further attention: the Beast of Revelation, which appears as the tailpiece to Revelation, and thus closes the Bible as a whole. The enormous Beast towers over a group of kneeling figures, which include two bishops, a king, two soldiers, and a monk—signifying various forms of worldly power. On the Beast's chest are the Hebrew words *tohu va bohu*, 'without form and void', which is how the world is described before Creation in Genesis 1:2, and thus Loutherbourg is identifying the Beast as undoing Creation.

According to Landseer, the tailpiece spoke to the contemporary context of 1800: 'The vigorous-minded designer of this vignette has evidently been of opinion that the reign of Napoleon was prefigured by [the] vision of the beast' (Landseer 1824b, 4). Landseer states that the beast is holding a Nilometer, a pillar used to indicate the height of the Nile during its annual floods, and hence, Landseer suggests, alludes to Napoleon's 1798 Egypt campaign. Napoleon came to be widely identified as the Antichrist, although Loutherbourg's image is earlier than most visual representations of that identification. A visual precedent is probably James Gillray's (1756–1815) *French Collossus* (1798)—a giant that bears striking similarities to Loutherbourg's Beast, stamping on the pyramids of Egypt. The object that Loutherbourg's Beast holds also resembles a triple cross, an emblem associated with the pope, which Loutherbourg used along with the papal tiara in the headpiece to 2 Thessalonians, to represent 'the assumed powers and privileges of Anti-Christ, resting on the seeming foundation of Holy-writ' (Landseer 1824b, 2). Thus, both the 2 Thessalonians headpiece and the Revelation tailpiece follow in a Protestant tradition of identifying the pope as the Antichrist. But the Napoleon identification that Landseer highlights also makes the design particularly topical to the time of its production in 1800, and, given its prominent place as the final image in the Macklin Bible, it can be seen as making the Bible as a whole speak to the political context in which it was published. As outlined above, any conceptual implications of the designs in the Bible were probably not planned by Macklin. Macklin may not even have seen this vignette as he died before the final plates were completed, and the tailpiece, though undated, was likely among the last to be designed and engraved. The image may also be a comment on the negative impact that the wars in Europe had had on the British art market, which, among other factors, had contributed to the Macklin Bible bankrupting its proprietor.

Heralds

Herald figures are another recurring motif in Loutherbourg's vignettes. For example, among the Old Testament [prophets](#), the headpiece to Joel represents 'the angel of the Lord blowing the trumpet of denunciation, which is mentioned at the beginning of ch. ii' (Landseer 1824a, 4), and that for Zephaniah 'is an angel descending with the symbol of divine justice—the sword and the scales—in poetical allusion to the terrible judgements which are denounced in ch. i' (Landseer 1824a, 5). Similarly, the headpiece to 1 Thessalonians 'is taken from the early part of the fifth chapter, and alludes to the destruction which shall suddenly overtake the wicked in "the day of the Lord"' (Landseer 1824b, 2). There are also heralding symbols, such as the trumpet that appears as the tailpiece to 2 John. The appearance of such motifs, as well as those of other themes discussed, in vignettes throughout the Bible gives the Macklin Bible an apocalyptic emphasis that can largely be attributed to Loutherbourg.

Conclusion

While there seems to have been no overall scheme for apocalyptic and millenarian designs in the Macklin Bible, it includes a significant body of images of this genre. This trend should be seen as a reflection of the prevalence of apocalyptic discourse and expectation in the 1790s milieu, the dramatic appeal of such subjects to artists as well as contemporaneous fashions for the sublime and gothic, and, at least in the case of Loutherbourg, the spiritual beliefs of the contributing artist(s). If a body of papers relating to Macklin or additional papers of the contributing artists came to light, more might be known about the motivations of the publisher and his artists in including such subjects in this most ambitious biblical illustration project of the period.

Further Reading

As has already been noted, there are limited extant primary sources relating to the Macklin Bible. There are numerous copies of the Macklin Bible available for consultation in public collections around the world, and a digital edition can be viewed on Manchester Digital Collections 'Bible Illustrations' collection (Billingsley, 2020). The catalogues for Macklin's annual exhibitions of the Bible paintings in 1790–93 and 1795–96 survive in various libraries in the UK and the USA, and some can be consulted online.

The most detailed account of Macklin's project is in G. E. Bentley Jr's *Thomas Macklin* (2016); it is not concerned with apocalyptic and millenarian designs specifically, but does include a detailed account of the commission of Fuseli's *St John's Vision*. Loutherbourg's apocalyptic designs for the Bible are the focus of a chapter in Morton D. Paley's *The Apocalyptic Sublime* (1986), within a broader account of apocalyptic subjects in British art of the period. The principal study on Loutherbourg is Olivier Lefeuvre's French-language *Philippe-Jacques de Loutherbourg* (2012). Lefeuvre includes English-language primary sources in an appendix.

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