

Challenged Iconography: The Last Folio in the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ* in the *Bible of Ávila*

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ABSTRACT

The *Bible of Ávila* holds the most complete cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ of Romanesque Spain. Each image is accompanied by an inscription written in Latin which was added sometime after the folios were completed. Nevertheless, the inscriptions do not identify correctly a number of people and scenes in the cycle. One of the questionable identifications is the last folio in the cycle. This scene was identified as the Pentecost or the Descend of the Holy Spirit, yet the iconography does not represent the typical elements that are associated with the Pentecost. This article investigates other iconographic alternatives that could explain the peculiar iconography and its position at the end of the cycle. cada a ciertos santos y a san Miguel, así como también al culto a las imágenes.

Key words: Bible of Ávila. Iconography. Manuscript. Romanesque.

Un problema iconográfico: El último folio del ciclo de la vida y la pasión de
Cristo en la *Biblia de Ávila*

RESUMEN

En la Biblia de Ávila se encuentra el ciclo pictórico de la vida y la pasión de Cristo más completo del Románico español. Cada escena viene acompañada por una inscripción en latín añadida poco después de que se completaran las imágenes. Sin embargo, no todas las inscripciones identifican los personajes o las escenas correctamente. Uno de los errores se encuentra en el último folio del ciclo que, habiendo sido identificado como Pentecostés o la bajada del Espíritu Santo, no presenta ninguna de las características iconográficas típicas de este tema. Este artículo investiga otras alternativas iconográficas que puedan explicar la peculiaridad de la imagen y la posición final del folio.

Palabras claves: Biblia de Ávila. Iconografía. Manuscrito. Románico.

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The National Library of Spain, located in Madrid, holds one of the most interesting illuminated manuscripts produced in Castile and León during the Middle Ages: The *Bible of Ávila* (Bibl. Nac. Cod. Vit. 15-1).¹ Scholars studying Romanesque Spain have cited the Bible on numerous occasions because inserted before the Gospels is the largest known iconographical cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ produced in twelfth century Spain.² The full cycle occupies three folios illuminated on the recto and the verso, and they represent the most independent cycle of New Testament scenes found in Romanesque Spain. Yet, despite the number of studies done on the *Bible of Ávila*, very few have challenged the archaic view that was set by previous scholars working on the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ*, especially the identification of the iconography in the last folio. The first part of this article will discuss the general characteristics of the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ*³ in order to place the last folio in its context. The second part will discuss the iconographical problem of the last folio on the *Cycle* by investigating and reviewing previous interpretations. And finally, a new interpretation of the iconography found in the last folio of the *Cycle* will be proposed using other visual evidence as possible iconographical sources to support this new interpretation.

The *Bible of Ávila* is a twelfth-century manuscript whose origins can be traced to the Umbro-Roman region in Italy from where it traveled to Spain sometime during the third quarter of the twelfth century.⁴ The *Bible of Ávila* seems to have been

¹ The *Bible of Ávila* has a long history of unresolved issues. A more detailed account of the *Cycle* can be found in Mónica A. Walker Vadillo, *The Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ in the Bible of Ávila* (Gainesville, 2004) (<http://purl.fcla.edu/fcla/etd/UFE0004840>).

² The main scholars that have studied the *Bible of Ávila* are very few. Among them are in chronological order: Gustavo Schulz in "Las Miniaturas de la Biblia de Ávila," *Boletín de la Sociedad Española de Excursionistas*, vol. V (1898), where he describes in general the cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ and he gives a transcription of the inscriptions that accompany the folios; J. Dominguez Bordona in *La Miniatura Española*, Tomo I (Barcelona, 1930), where he describes the general features of the Bible; E.B. Garrison in *Studies in the History of Medieval Italian Painting* (Florence, 1953-1961), where he discusses the Tuscan origins of the Ávila Bible Master of the Italian section; K. Berg in *Studies in Tuscan Twelfth-Century Illumination* (Oslo, 1968), where he discusses the Italian section of the *Bible of Ávila* with little or no mention to the Spanish section; Walter Cahn in *Romanesque Illumination* (New York, 1982), where he describes the general aspects of the Bible using as a source Dominguez Bordona; John Williams in *The Art of Medieval Spain, ad 500-1200* (New York, 1993), writes a short introduction to the *Bible of Ávila*; María Rodríguez Velasco in "Iconografía del Nuevo Testamento en la Biblia de Ávila," en *Actas del V Simposio Bíblico Español. La Biblia en el Arte y en la Literatura* (Valencia, 1999), where she describes the New Testament iconography of the cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ, but also in very general terms without adding new information to what all the previous scholars have contributed; and finally, from this same author *The Bible of Ávila* (Madrid, 2005), which is her recently completed dissertation where she treats the subject of the *Bible of Ávila* in general. Unfortunately, this dissertation has not been published and therefore I have not consulted it to my greatest regret.

³ From now the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ* will be referred to as the *Cycle*.

⁴ Garrison, op. cit., pp. 59-60, states "The Ávila Bible Master was thought, on the basis of his geometrical initial style to have begun his career in the Umbro-Roman region, and most probably in Rome." In addition, in *The Art of Medieval Spain*, op. cit., pp. 298-299, John W. Williams states that the original Italian format of the Bible of Ávila has been associated with exported Bibles encountered notably in Germany as well as in sites in Italy.

designed for exportation, and it has been associated with other Bibles of a similar format found in Germany and other sites in Italy. Yet, for all the sumptuousness of the Italian section it remained inexplicably unfinished. Once it reached Spain, the manuscript was completed and brought into greater conformity with Spanish usage by introducing the texts of Esdras 3 through 5, and the Psalms. The three folios depicting the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ* were also incorporated at this time.

The *Cycle* is depicted on three folios that are illuminated on the recto and the verso (fig. 1).⁵ There are twenty illuminations narrating several episodes of the Life and Passion of Jesus Christ. The cycle starts with the Baptism of Christ, Wedding Feast at Canaan, Presentation in the Temple, the Temptations of Christ, the Entry of Christ into Jerusalem, the Last Supper, the Washing of the Disciples' Feet, the Kiss of Judas, the Crucifixion, the Deposition, the Three Maries at the Tomb, the Descent of Christ into Hell (*Anastasis*), the Resurrection (*Noli me Tangere*), Road to Emmaus, Supper at Emmaus, Doubting Thomas, the Ascension, and concludes with the iconography identified by a scribe as the Pentecost.

The general characteristics of the *Cycle* can be described as follows: the three folios are ruled to create registers that are framed usually on the top, bottom, left and right with geometric borders and curvilinear patterns. Each register contains one or more scenes relating to the Life and the Passion of Christ. Some of the figures overlap or step out of the frames. The drawn figures are colored with tempera paint with reds, greens, light blues, blues, yellows and browns dominating the color scheme. A number of figures have not been finished. All representations of the face of the devil and the faces of the hellish creatures have been subsequently scratched out. Finally, each illumination is accompanied by one or more inscriptions written in Latin. The inscriptions are located in awkward places, such as the outside of the frame, or fitting the spaces between the figures, and thus they appear to have been added after the illuminations were completed. There is not a true parallelism between the written text and the image. Some of these inscriptions are descriptions of the event that is being depicted; others have been copied literally from the actual passages found in the *Bible of Ávila*. In addition, several mistakes were made in the identification of several folios. The inscription found in the Wedding Feast at Canaan situated above the bride and the groom reads as follows *hic nuptie architriclini*, which can be translated as «here the wedding of the cupbearer.» The written inscription found on the last folio seems to have been erroneous as well in its interpretation of the iconography.

The last folio (fol. 325 v) on the *Cycle* has a number of characteristics that set it apart from the rest of the cycle. Unlike the other scenes, the last folio is not framed (Fig.

⁵ Very few scholars have done an iconographic analysis of the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ* in the *Bible of Ávila*. The article written by María Rodríguez Velasco, "Iconografía del Nuevo Testamento en la Biblia de Ávila," en *Actas del V Simposio Bíblico Español. La Biblia en el Arte y en la Literatura* (Valencia, 1999), and her dissertation on the Bible of Ávila are the only two examples known to me that have attempted to describe the iconography of the Cycle, her analysis in both cases is short and I believe it needs further explanation, especially in the dubious interpretation of one of the scenes.

2). The illumination depicts Christ enthroned over an architectural setting composed of two towers and two arches that frame the twelve Apostles. Christ is presented fully frontal for the first time and he is seated on a red and yellow double mandorla. He is also elevated on a dais. He wears a cross halo, a red tunic, and a green and yellow mantle. His hands are at his sides and he presents the front of the palms to the viewer as they point down while he speaks to the Apostles below. Flanking Christ on either side are two angels coming out of the clouds holding large censers. The twelve Apostles are standing beneath the two arches and have either their eyes or their face tilted up, staring at Christ. Most of the Apostles are beardless. They all wear tunics and mantles of different colors. All the figures are placed in front of a patterned background with small squares filled with X's and contoured with a red line that resembles a rose.

One inscription identifies this scene. The inscription, *In die pentecostes sps scs super discipulos uenit*, which can be translated as «In the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit comes above the disciples,» is located above the illumination, over the head of Christ and the angels. Yet the iconography that appears in the folio does not conform to the traditional iconography of the Pentecost (Acts of the Apostles 2, 1-41). The Pentecost was characterized by the descent of the Holy Spirit, who was usually represented as a dove or the hand of God and not as Christ himself as it appears in the folio of the *Bible of Ávila*. In addition, the «tongues of fire» (Acts 2, 3) were also represented as either tongues or as candle lights over the heads of the Apostles. Furthermore, the Virgin Mary was also present and there were only eleven Apostles because the twelfth Apostle, Judas, had committed suicide after Christ's crucifixion (Matthew 27, 3-10). These elements do not appear in the last folio of the *Bible of Ávila*, therefore it is possible that an alternative interpretation could be closer to the iconography than the written inscription that accompanies the scene. As mentioned in the beginning of this article, the awkward placement of the inscriptions, and their filling the negative space between the figures would seem to indicate that the inscriptions were added at an uncertain time after the illuminations of the *Cycle* were completed. Thus, the scribe that wrote the inscriptions for these illuminations may have misinterpreted the iconography of the scene. The first scholar to challenge this idea was María Rodríguez Velasco who pointed out that the most significant elements of the Pentecost, like the Virgin Mary or the Holy Spirit, were not present. In her article, Velasco suggested that this scene might as well represent the Mission to the Apostles (Matthew 28: 19; Luke 24:50-53).⁶ Nevertheless, this identification could be troublesome as well since it does not explain the presence of the angels nor the architecture on the background nor the descending movement of Christ and the angels.⁷ Another possibility exists that could account for all the elements present in the last folio of the *Cycle*: the possibility that this scene represents the Second Coming of Christ (Acts of the

⁶ Rodríguez Velasco, op. cit., p. 364, mentions that “la inscripción que la encabeza no deja lugar a dudas sobre el argumento de la miniatura: Pentecostés. Sin embargo la representación plástica parece más acorde con la imagen de Jesús encomendando a sus apóstoles la misión de evangelizar el mundo.”

⁷ Matthew 28:16 mentions that this scene took place on a mountain in Galilee where Jesus had asked them to go.

Apostles 1:9-11; Revelations 1:7), which is a part of the cycle of the Glorification of Christ. This identification could account for the frontal iconic figure of Christ seated on a double mandorla and flanked by angels, the presence of twelve Apostles and the introduction of an architectural space on the scene.

A description of a number of twelfth-century iconographic examples found in different media in Romanesque Spain would allow for a clearer interpretation of the last folio in the *Cycle* by comparing the former with the later. The examples will show other scenes from the Pentecost and the Second Coming of Christ. These scenes were created before the *Cycle* in the *Bible of Ávila* was completed and they could have inspired the artist not only in the choice of imagery but also in his very personal style.

A traditional example of the Pentecost comes from the cloister of the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos (Burgos) dated to the last third of the 11th century (Fig. 3).⁸ In terms of iconography there are very few similarities. The twelve Apostles are located on the bottom of the composition, with six of them arranged in a front row, and the other remaining six placed behind them. At the top appears the head of the Virgin Mary staring at the hand of God that comes out from a cloud, flanked by two angels. The only similarity is that the twelve Apostles are looking towards heaven. The cross-position of the feet of the Apostles seems to indicate that they are seated, and not standing.⁹ In terms of style both works are similar in their linear quality on their treatment of the drapery. From this iconographic and stylistic analysis of a traditional image of the Pentecost in Spain, we can infer that the iconography that is present in the *Cycle* in the *Bible of Ávila* is different.

Yet, as previously mentioned, the iconography of the Pentecost has been questioned by María Rodríguez Velasco who believes that the iconography in the *Bible of Ávila* could also relate to the Mission to the Apostles because there is no indication of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, and the Virgin Mary is absent.¹⁰ Rodríguez Velasco does not go into any more detail or explanation of why the folio in the *Bible of Ávila* could represent the Mission to the Apostles, but if this identification is accepted, then two questions remain: why are there twelve figures in the *Cycle*, if in the Mission to the Apostles only eleven were present, and why the artist of the *Cycle* did not place it before the Ascension, and then make the Ascension of Christ into Heaven the final scene?

I would like to suggest that the iconography of the last folio in the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ* is the Second Coming of Christ. In Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1: 9-11) two men in white apparel told Christ's disciples that «[...] why stand ye gazing

⁸ M. Palacios, J. Yarza Luaces, y R. Torres, *El Monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos*, (Madrid, 1989), p. 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23, mention that the position of the feet of the figures is related to dancing. Nevertheless, through observation and a careful reading of the literature of the Pentecost (Acts 2:1-5) where it is stated, "And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty with, and it filled all the house where they were sitting." It would seem logical to conclude that the position of the feet of the Apostles is that of sitting, but because of the limited space of a vertical slab, the artist has minimized the position that is now being indicated in the position of the feet.

¹⁰ Rodríguez Velasco, *op. cit.* p. 364.

up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.» The «in like manner» would translate into pictorial terms as Christ coming in an Ascension-type of iconography. This will also explain the position of the iconography from the Second Coming of Christ at the end of the *Cycle*, because what could be more final than the Last Judgment?

During the Romanesque period the iconography of the Second Coming of Christ was well established in the Peninsula. There are a number of examples of the Second Coming of Christ in the Commentary to the Apocalypse by Beatus of Liébana. An example of this can be seen in the 10th to 11th century *Beatus* of San Millán de la Cogolla, Rioja (Logroño) (Fig. 4).¹¹ In terms of iconography both represent Christ, who is flanked by two angels, and below them stand the Apostles—although there are only nine in the example from San Millán. It is interesting that neither example shows Christ holding the Book of the Just in His hand. Another similarity is the fact that, except Christ, none of the figures wear halos. In terms of style, both examples are clearly divided into two levels, even though the example of San Millán uses a cloud to achieve this division, while the example in the *Bible of Ávila* uses architecture, and both span the width of the figures underneath.

In addition there are other examples where an enthroned Christ on a *mandorla* is found in the same context with the twelve Apostles standing under architecture.

An example can be found in the gilt-copper alloy with cabochons casket of Saint Demetrius found in the church of San Esteban, Loarre (Huesca) in circa 1100 (fig. 5).¹² The four sides of the casket represent the twelve Apostles, who are depicted under arcades, and they are gazing upward with ecstatic attitudes. One side of the lid depicts Christ enthroned in a mandorla surrounded by the Tetramorphs, and the other side depicts a triumphal Christ flanked by four angels.¹³ In terms of style the similarities are very close. The drapery of the figures has the same linear quality, with soft curving edges. In addition the folds on the front of some of the garments fall with semicircular convex shapes, and the top garments of some figures have semicircular concave shapes. Another similarity comes from the way the nose and the upper lip of the figures are united by a straight line, which is evident in both examples.

A second example that comes from the sumptuary arts is the black oak and gilded silver *Arca Santa* of Ovideo dated to the late 11th or early 12th century (Fig. 6).¹⁴ On one of the side panels of the *Arca*, Christ is enthroned in a mandorla that is being held by angels—which is similar to its counterpart in the *Bible of Ávila*—and at either side, arranged in two registers, are the twelve Apostles who are located under-

¹¹ M. Mentre, *Illuminated Manuscripts of Medieval Spain* (London, 1996), p. 210, mentions that illustration of the Vision of the Second Coming of Christ is generally arranged in two different levels that are clearly separated «by means of a cloud barring the width of the horizon above the humans.»

¹² *The Art of Medieval Spain, ad 500-1200*, op. cit., pp. 257-258. Charles T. Little has argued that the body and the lid of the casket are iconographically linked to the theme of the Second Coming of Christ.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *The Art of Medieval Spain, ad 500-1200*, op. cit., pp. 259-260.

neath individual arcades. An important observation needs to be made, in both examples Christ does not carry the Book of the Just in His hand. The *Arca Santa* also presents a number of inscriptions identifying the iconography of the scenes and the events that are taking place. In terms of style the similarities are numerous. The drapery is similar in the way it wraps around the figures, in the patterns of semicircular folds on the front of their garments, and in the way the legs are very clearly outlined underneath their garments. Christ's *pallium* wraps symmetrically over his shoulders, allowing a view of the tunic underneath.

These three examples show the way in which the iconography of the Second Coming of Christ was well established in the Peninsula from the 10th to 12th centuries, and even though the examples from the sumptuary arts and manuscript illumination are not exact, they can be used as a conceptual source for the iconography present in the last folio of the *Cycle of the Life and Passion of Christ in the Bible of Ávila*. Taking into consideration this visual evidence, it is possible that the iconography present at the end of the *Cycle* is that of the Second Coming of Christ, since the iconography seems to concur visually with the miniature found in the Beatus of San Millán de la Cogolla and conceptually with both examples found in the sumptuary arts depicting the Second Coming or Glorification of Christ. I will further suggest that the architecture present in the Second Coming of Christ in the *Cycle* stands for the Church. The head-down composition of the angels will indicate a descending movement and they are holding the double mandorla, on which Christ sits, which represents his coming back «in like manner,» just like when he Ascended into Heaven. In this case Christ is descending to take possession of the *Hetoimasia*, the throne that has been prepared for him in the Church from where he would pass judgment at the end of time. This assumption seems to be supported by the fact that the event is taking place in front of a background of star-patterns that would place the scene on a heavenly setting.¹⁵ If this interpretation is accepted, then it will explain the peculiarities of the iconography and its placement at the end of the cycle. Neither the Pentecost nor the Mission to the Apostles took place after the Ascension of Christ. This scene, done on a full page, will then complete the Glorification of Christ as the Son of God, an underlying theme that was present throughout the entire *Cycle*. These elements support the assumption that the iconography present in the last folio of the *Life and Passion of Christ in the Bible of Ávila* stands for the Second Coming of Christ instead of Pentecost or Mission to the Apostles.¹⁶

¹⁵ The star pattern that appears in the Bible of Avila has been abstracted or minimized to its essential components: a cross that has been surrounded by a red outline that creates a flower pattern. The abstracted flower pattern can be found in examples such as the ivory panel in Leon of Christ in Majesty with Saints Peter and Paul dated to circa 1063 (see *The Art of Medieval Spain, ad 500-1200*, 1993, p. 246, Fig. 112), or in the mural paintings of the Pantheon of the Kings in San Isidoro de Leon (see Viñayo Gonzalez, *San Isidoro de Leon Pantheon de los Reyes*, 1995, Fig. 14), where both versions of the flower pattern and the abstraction of it can be found.

¹⁶ There is the possibility that this scene is actually the conflation of two episodes from the Life and Passion of Christ as the one found in La Madelaine, Vézelay (France), in 1120-1132, where the Ascension of Christ and the Mission to the Apostles are depicted simultaneously on the same scene. Nevertheless, the evidence that I have presented in this article could suggest otherwise.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Scenes from the *Biblia de Ávila*, Spain, second quarter of the 12th century. Tempera on parchment, 585 x 385 mm. Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Cod. Vit.15-1, fols. CCCXXIII r. and CCCXXVIII v.



Figure 2. Second Coming of Christ, from the *Biblia de Ávila*, Spain, second quarter of the 12th century. Tempera on parchment, 585 x 385 mm. Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid, Cod. Vit.15-1, fol. CCCXXV v.



Figure 3. Pentecost, from the cloister of the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos (Burgos), last third of the 11th century.



Figure 4. Second Coming of Christ, *Beatus* of San Millán de la Cogolla. Madrid, R.A.H., 33, fol. 17v.



Figure 5. Casket of Saint Demetrius, Aragon, ca.1100. Gilt-copper alloy with cabochons, on wood core, 35x60x40 cm. Church of San Esteban, Loarre (Huesca).



Figure 6. Christ in Majesty, *Arca Santa* of Oviedo (Oviedo), late 11th century or early 12th century. Black oak and gilded silver, 73x119x93 cm. B) Cámara Santa, Oviedo Cathedral.

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