

The Massacre of the Innocents and Flight into Egypt in the Bible Moralisée of Naples

By Yves Christe and Marianne Besseyre

f. 138r (Matt. 2: 16-18) – “This is the story: How Herod had all the children in Bethlehem and in all his territories slaughtered. Thus says Saint Matthew in his Gospel in the second chapter.”



Bible moralisée of Naples (c. 1340-1350, Naples) Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Image courtesy Moleiro Editor

Like the Adoration of the Magi (f. 136r) and Presentation in the Temple (f. 137v), the Slaughter of the Innocents provided a wealth of inspiration for medieval paintings for it is an important event in the earthly life of Christ and a tragedy that prefigures the blood of the Christian martyrs shed for him.

The overseer of the New Testament cycle in the *Bible moralisée de Naples* opted to situate the illustration of the slaughter of the innocents in the volume before the holy family's flight into Egypt, unlike in the Gospel of Matthew even though this is the text cited in the paraphrase. The evangelist says that when Herod realised that the wise men were not coming back to tell him about Jesus, he flew into a terrible rage and ordered all the children under the age of two in the territory of Bethlehem to be slaughtered.

Painter A was undoubtedly inspired by the scene Giotto painted on the walls of the Arena chapel in Padua and borrowed the idea of the king in a lofty balcony stretching out his right arm to order the slaughter. The miniature depicts the despot pointing his index finger directly at a woman clutching her baby boy to her breast whilst the executioner pointing his sword at the child looks at the balcony where two other persons are talking about the scene.

In the opposite corner of the composition, on the bottom at the right, the illuminator again copies Giotto's work exactly when portraying this man, shown here beardless and dressed all in red, aiming his sharp sword at a naked child he has already grabbed by the calf. Just behind, a newborn is mercilessly disembowelled, and his little arm in the air brutally seized by the heartless soldier to accomplish his crime is identical to the one in the Padua fresco. But unlike his illustrious predecessor, our miniaturist decided to portray bloodshed. Two weeping women in the foreground helplessly watch their agonising offspring on their lap. One woman raises her forearms with elbows bent and palms open to convey her grief whilst the other is depicted wringing her hands with apparently a twisted smile that is, in fact, an expression of her immense sorrow.

The Flight of the Holy Family into Egypt (ff. 139v and 140v)

This episode inspired two illustrations of the same theme, but neither is superfluous because each artist has portrayed the scene according to his own temperament: most significantly, f. 140v by master A offers an abridged, narrative version of the event whilst the previous leaf depicts the flight in a picturesque, visionary painting.

f. 139v (Matt. 2: 12-13) – *“This is the story of how the angel appeared to Joseph as he slept and said to him: Joseph rise up and take the child and his mother and flee to Egypt and stay there until I tell you. Thus says Saint Matthew in his Gospel in the second chapter”.*



Bible moralisée of Naples (c. 1340-1350, Naples) Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
Image courtesy Moleiro Editor

After the wise men pay tribute to the Christ child, God warns them in a dream not to return to Herod and they decide to take another route home. Providence once again visits Joseph by night and orders him to take refuge in Egypt with Mary and Jesus, for Herod will search for the child to kill him. Painter A provides a visionary and intellectualised version of the episode by showing the angel appearing in a dream to Joseph in a separate register, above the man lying with his wife on a long white mattress, each occupying one end. It will be remembered that the old man never had carnal knowledge of Mary, even after the birth of Christ: the painter has found a suitable device for depicting them together but chaste.

The construction of this page is magnificent. First, it portrays one indoor and one outdoor scene above each other and yet organically linked. The landscape carves into the plane of the folio creating a contrast that breathes more intimacy and depth into the room occupied by the spouses. The room's vanishing point, hemmed in by a Giotto-style box, provides the framework for a multi-strata background: in the hearth, a watchful cat warms itself by the coals next to a tripod used as a support for cauldrons; two humble pieces of furniture – a low table and a chest – stand against a wall; a door opens onto the stable in the centre of the composition, providing a rather contrived frame for the focal point of this painting, i.e. the donkey that will make the flight possible.

The orthogonal symmetry of the room is tempered by the harmonious curve of the holy spouses' bed, just as the vertical trees in the upper register contrast with the round boulders.

This open landscape above their heads conveys a dreamlike yet earthly world beyond; it materializes the place of salvation that awaits at the end of a long journey: they must first cross arid plateaux and then dark forests before finally seeing in the distance the walls of a city where they can take refuge.

This page with its first-rate illustration was added to quire 22: as was f. 132 in the same hand. The original quaternion (8 folios) was therefore increased by two paintings which are in a way more detailed and enhanced repetitions of the illuminations of the Nativity and the Flight into Egypt by painter A.

f. 140v (Matt. 2: 14) – *“This is the story: How Joseph took Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and they fled into Egypt as instructed by the angel. Thus says Saint Matthew in his Gospel in the second chapter.”*



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Image courtesy Moleiro Editor

The flight as such is, in fact, depicted here at the beginning of a new quire of 4 parchment folios (or binion, ff. 140-143). This miniature depicts the text that tells how “Joseph arose, took the child and his mother by night and left for Egypt”. The biblical paraphrase fails to specify that the scene took place by night, an important detail, possibly to save painter A from

the predicament of having to portray a night scene: an impossible mission because of the gold ground. The portrayal of the figures in this naive composition is not very masterful (to a modern beholder, the donkey seems to walk on Joseph's feet) but as we know, pictorial realism is not the main aim, as demonstrated by the artificial backdrop of the citadel surrounded by ramparts in the background, the intention being to suggest a haven where the Holy Family can hide from Herod's murderous madness.

Mary sits sidesaddle on the donkey clasping baby Jesus to her breast. He is depicted in swaddling clothes and crowned with a cruciform nimbus whose outline is invisible for the artist seems to have forgotten to draw the circle of his halo on the gold leaf as he did for the other characters. Joseph walks backwards with a bundle on his shoulder, resting his hand on the hindquarters of the donkey. The angel garbed in a flame-colour robe holding its bridle leads it towards the place of refuge. The small party goes past high cliffs that evoke foreign lands and the dangers of travelling but the heavenly messenger stretches his arm out towards the city on the horizon.

This was an excerpt from The Bible moralisée of Naples commentary volume by Yves Christer (Honorary Professor, Université de Genève) and Marianne Besseyre (Curator at the Centre de recherche sur les manuscrits enluminés, BnF). Our thanks to Moleiro Editor for this text and images. You can learn more about this Books of Hours by visiting: www.moleiro.com