

The Leo Bible: A Byzantine Masterpiece at Tisch Library

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Few Byzantine manuscripts so vividly unite artistic ambition, personal devotion, and elite self-fashioning as the so-called *Leo Bible*. At the request of Associate Art History Professor Dr. Alice Isabella Sullivan, the Tisch Library at Tufts University has recently acquired a full-size facsimile of this monumental work. This remarkable manuscript was commissioned around 940 CE by a man named Leo, whose donor inscription identifies his status as a patrician, eunuch, court chamberlain, and treasurer. It was made for the monastery of St. Nicholas, which was founded by Leo's brother, Constantine. According to an inscription embedded within the work, Leo presented the book as a pious offering intended to redeem his sins and to obtain the favor of the Virgin Mary and Saint Nicholas.¹ The manuscript's large size, detailed donor inscription, and lavish illuminations all testify to Leo's munificent gesture, which was likely motivated by both personal devotion and the desire to display his wealth and status within Byzantine society.²

Beyond its obvious material value, the *Leo Bible* has long fascinated historians because it represents one of the earliest extant Byzantine picture bibles and one of the largest volumes ever produced in a Byzantine scriptorium. Although the manuscript originally contained both the Old and New Testaments, only the Old Testament portion survives today, consisting of 565 folios.³ The work is also significant because it was produced not long after the tumultuous iconoclastic controversies of the eighth and ninth centuries CE.⁴ During this period, fierce debates over the legitimacy of religious images led to the destruction of many works of art and even the suppression of image-making. The *Leo Bible's* text reveals a self-conscious commentary on the inherent value of coordinating text and image to aid spirituality—a concept that had previously



Leo Bible, fol. Iir: Genesis frontispiece. Fol. 1r: Description in iambic verse of the contents of the manuscript and the circumstances of its making. Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University. Photograph by the author.

1 Georges Sid ris, "Eunuchs of Light': Power, Imperial Ceremonial and Positive Representations of Eunuchs in Byzantium (4th–12th Centuries AD)," in *Eunuchs in Antiquity and Beyond*, ed. Shaun Tougher (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2002), 168–169, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1n35846.13>.

2 David Olster, "Byzantine Hermeneutics after Iconoclasm: Word and Image in the *Leo Bible*," *Byzantion* 64, no. 2 (1994): 419, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44172184>.

3 Kelsey Eldridge, *K      and Synthesis: Epigrams, Miniatures, and Authorship in the Leo Bible* (MA thesis, University of Washington, 2014), 6, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/07d2cb2d-997c-40eb-bcb6-83c0f4e9371c/content>.

4 Paroma Chatterjee, "The Emperor and the Idyll," in *The Bucolic Mode in Byzantine Art: Sound, Weather, Imperium*, new ed. (Leeds: Arc Humanities Press, 2025), 124, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.38843901.8>.



Leo Bible, fol. 263r: Samuel anointing David as king. Tisch Library Special Collections, Tufts University. Photograph by the author.

caused so much contention and destruction during the iconoclastic period.⁵ Similarly, the manuscript's visual program suggests a deliberate effort to reassert the legitimacy and usefulness of images within the context of a religious text. The *Leo Bible* therefore provides a valuable window into the intellectual, cultural, and artistic climate that emerged after the restoration of icons in the mid-ninth century CE.⁶

Of particular interest to art historians are the manuscript's thirteen full-page miniatures (or images) in addition to the complex interplay between the Greek epigrams and the accompanying illustrations. Entire pages are devoted to imagery, and their presentation—framed with decorative inscriptions in a manner reminiscent of easel paintings—further emphasizes their importance within the manuscript.⁷ The style of these images is also noteworthy. The miniatures display a painterly and classicizing style, which has encouraged scholars to discuss the relationship between the more stylized iconic imagery of Byzantine tradition and this naturalistic interpretation of tradition-

al iconography, calling into question whether there was a "Macedonian Renaissance" or whether these classicizing elements represent a continuation of earlier artistic interests. Thus, the *Leo Bible* also serves as an invaluable resource for examining the relationship between text and image and for understanding how disparate influences shaped the artistic production of this period.

Today, the original manuscript is preserved a continent away in the Vatican Library, where access is strictly limited and especially difficult for younger scholars to obtain. This acquisition helps overcome those geographical and institutional barriers, making possible a more immediate encounter with the manuscript and a stronger sense of its physical grandeur. Its extraordinarily large scale becomes palpable as its weighty pages are turned, while its carefully orchestrated visual program comes into sharper focus through the interplay of miniatures and text in ways that digital images cannot replicate. Therefore, the acquisition of this new, high-quality facsimile provides a unique and important opportunity for students, researchers, and members of the Tufts community to engage directly with one of the most significant surviving manuscripts of the Byzantine world.

5 Rico Franses, "The Literal, the Symbolic, and the Contact Portrait: On Belief in the Interaction between Human and Divine," in *Donor Portraits in Byzantine Art: The Vicissitudes of Contact between Human and Divine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 194–222.

6 David Olster, "Byzantine Hermeneutics after Iconoclasm."

7 Helen C. Evans, ed., *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 87.