

# A Remarkable Bible

This month's cover photograph shows Bury St Edmunds Abbey, birthplace of a rare and beautiful Bible, known as 'The Bury Bible'. At a time when many people regard the Bible as unimportant, it is refreshing to remember that it was once considered the most important book in the world – a book that was to be adorned and adored.

## A Major Undertaking

Today, at the flick of a switch, we can access any part of the Bible on computer, and it is easy to take that facility for granted. It takes some effort to identify with a time when not only was there no computer technology, but no printing at all! Imagine too, a time when reading and writing were skills available to only a minority of people, in an age when all texts were produced by hand.

We can try to picture what it was like to face the huge task of writing out the whole Bible by hand. Add to this the extraordinary skills needed to illustrate this book so beautifully and we can still only begin to appreciate the work of someone called Master Hugo who, around the year 1135 AD, set about creating 'The Bury Bible'.

This Bible was created in the Benedictine monastery of Bury St Edmunds when it was at the height of its power in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It was one of the largest monasteries in Europe and fabulously wealthy. This period is well documented, including an important diary written by Jocelyn de Brakeland, who gives a comprehensive picture of everyday life within the abbey.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Abbot Anselm enlarged and beautified the abbey not

only with buildings but also with artefacts and books. We know there was a library of around one hundred books, which was a huge number for the day when we consider that they were all hand-written. This 'scriptorium' must have been one of the busiest in the country. Abbey records tell us that "Hervey, the Sacrist, commissioned a large Bible for his brother the prior and had it beautifully illustrated by Master Hugo".

Hugo's title of 'Master' makes it probable that the abbey hired him. He must have been well paid, for his materials included 350 Scottish or Irish calfskins, one for each page, and expensive colours for illustration



Depiction of Hannah's story from the Bury Bible

including gold and lapis lazuli – the latter only found in Afghanistan. This Bible was probably written between 1130 and 1135 and took two years to produce. Three scribes worked alongside Master Hugo, who is the earliest recorded professional artist in England.

## **The Treasured Bible in Use**

The Bible was a wonderful work of art and an abbey treasure but how was it used? It was probably placed in the church for public reading and also displayed on the feast of St. Edmund. As was customary, it may also have been read aloud at mealtimes since it was referred to as a Refectory Bible in the 15th century.

We do not know which parts of the Bible were read. Nor do we know how much of the Latin text was understood by those who heard it read aloud. We do know that it was used regularly and that it was highly respected.

After the dissolution of the abbey, at the time of Henry VIII, the treasures were distributed far and wide. The Bible came into the ownership of Matthew Parker who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1559. Upon his death, the Bible was given to Corpus Christi College, Cambridge where it has remained in The Parker Library ever since. Of the original two volumes only the Old Testament survives. It is not accessible to the general public but, in recent years, a facsimile edition has been published, allowing us to see a marvellous example of a Vulgate Bible. Art historians class it as a masterpiece of the English Romanesque period. Master Hugo has been likened to a British Michelangelo, because of the quality and beauty of the artwork he produced.

## **The Bible's Real Power**

How things have changed! Today anyone can get and read a Bible. Unlike the majority of people in the Middle Ages we are not dependent on highly selective readings and interpretations in a language we do not understand. From the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards people have marvelled at the artwork in illuminated manuscripts, but we can marvel at the illumination of God's word and the fact that it has been preserved through the ages.

Even more than this, it declares a way of life for all mankind. This makes the Bible, whichever language, translation or version we read, both powerful and valuable. The advice of the apostle Paul to the young man Timothy is as relevant now as it was in the first century:

*You must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:14–17).*

## **Valerie Saberton**

*Images from The Bury Bible by permission of the Master and Fellows of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge*

ctas. q̄e usq; hodie uiculus trib; ab  
 ierosolimis distans milib;: Sacros  
 ex sacerdotib; & in matris uero sc̄i  
 ficatus: uirginitate sua euangelicū  
 uirū xpi ecclie dedicant. hic uacu  
 nari exorsus est puer: & captiuitate  
 urbis atq; iude; n̄ solum spū sed &  
 oculis in uiculus est. Iam dece tribus  
 isrl' assyrū in medos transtulerant.  
 iam uis earū colonie gentiū possi  
 debant. Vnde in iuda tantū & ben  
 iaminus pp̄hant & ciuitatis sue rui  
 nas quadrupla planxit alfabeto:  
 qd̄ nos mensure metri uer sibusq;  
 reddim;: Preca ordmē uisionū q̄ apd

grecos & latinos omnino confusus  
 est: ad pristina fidem correxi. Li  
 brum autē baruch notari eius quia  
 apud hebreos nec legitur nec habet  
 p̄missim; p̄bis omnibus maledic  
 ta absculit prestolantes: quib;  
 me necesse est p̄singula opuscula re  
 spondere. Et hoc patior: quia nos  
 me cogit. Ceterū ad compendium  
 mali. rectius fuerat modū furorē cor  
 silentio meo ponere: qm̄ cotidie noui  
 aliquo scripitante in uiculis infa  
 mam puocare. **EXPLICIT PRŒATIO:**

**I**N P̄HIERONIAS PROB̄A:



Depiction of the prophet Jeremiah and the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem from the Bury Bible