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ROLAND BETANCOURT, Performing the Gospels in Byzantium: Sight, Sound, and Space in the Divine Liturgy. Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. xxii, 330 pp. with 127 ill. – ISBN 978-11-0849139-6 ($ 130.00)

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If you walk into a church on Sunday morning, you will hear a passage from the Gospels. 'Wisdom! Stand up! Let us listen to the holy Gospel. Peace be to all! The reading is from the holy Gospel according to Luke. Let us attend', thousands of Orthodox priests declared last week, 23 January 2022, proceeding to intone in a solemn, melodious voice those nine verses from the evangelist's text that tell about Jesus healing a blind man. Such is the custom today. The book under review is an attempt to imagine what would happen a thousand years ago.

Imagine one must, because no direct records of the practice survive. What we do have is several hundred manuscripts of a type that scholars term 'Gospel lectionary'. In them, passages like the one from Luke are collected and ordered by the days on which they were to be read, e.g. John 1:1–17 for Easter Sunday, Matthew 2:1–12 for 25 December, and so on. BETANCOURT has chosen nine such manuscripts, listed at the bottom of his p. 3. All nine date from the eleventh century,[1] all are illustrated, all are exceptionally well preserved, all are likely to have been produced in Constantinople. This sample is homogenous enough to ensure a focused study. It also provides for a large number of beautiful colour photographs which embellish BETANCOURT's text. Copiously annotated with bibliographic references, the latter clearly results from extensive research.

The nine lectionaries themselves are a marvel to behold. Their pages are interspersed with numerous small pictures showing episodes from the Bible. The beginning of each new passage is signalled by colourful ornament, including on occasion plants and birds. One codex opens with a full-blown carpet-page. The front leaf of another carries the image of a church wherein,

[1] The date of c. 1100 given on pp. 2 and 112 is misleadingly precise; cf. 'the eleventh century, when these Gospel lectionaries were produced' (p. 26). At another point (p. 51) BETANCOURT says that one of his nine lectionaries dates from the thirteenth century; this is certainly wrong.

one might assume, this particular manuscript was first housed. In all nine, the text is elaborately punctuated with red or gilded marks that would prompt a reader to modulate his voice.

BETANCOURT, 'an art historian trained in the methods and narratives of Byzantine art' (p. 165), sets out to investigate 'how miniatures, illustrated initials, and marginalia in the Gospel book operate alongside the text and the text's recitation in the Divine Liturgy' (p. 3). Tendrils, vines, birds, and further 'ornamental motifs' may have served as memory cues. These are mentioned but once, in passing (p. 37). Other initials letters or marginal pictures have identifiable religious content. These, BETANCOURT points out, might sometimes form pun-like combinations with the adjacent text: take, for instance, the Hand of God painted right before the letters θέως which resemble in their turn the word Θεός (pp. 64–66).[2] Images could also highlight specific passages: thus, a figure of Jesus Christ marks 'Jesus came to Capernaum', while a demoniac painted opposite Him stresses that 'with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits' (pp. 80–83). Some illustrations are slightly ambiguous: from one page to another in a single manuscript, the evangelist John seems to change into the clothes of his disciple. 'In cladding John with the garment of Prochoros, the artist has encoded in this image not merely the event of John's inspiration, but rather the textual body of the Gospel of John' (p. 136).

Miniatures, illustrated initials, and marginalia were aimed, according to BETANCOURT, at influencing a lector's delivery of the biblical text. By means of reading out loud, a cleric could transmit to his congregation things that he saw on the page in front of him. 'Initials, miniatures, and adjoining marginalia ease readers into the images that the text conveys and they help train the perceptual habits of their users, empowering them and reminding them to actively invest their mental faculties in the Gospel so as to make visible the text on the page. For those in the audience, who lacked direct visual contact with these marginal scenes, similar images would crop up in their minds as they listened intently to a chanter's words and imagined the stories being told. Because of their training in ways to perceive and in the established iconographies of Byzantine art, viewers and hearers likely partook in the same mental imagery' (p. 113).

It goes without saying that Gospel lectionaries were read inside a church,

[2] BETANCOURT does note that 'the difference between omega and omicron, while deeply connected and assimilated in certain pronunciations of Greek, still would have borne a certain distinctiveness' (p. 64).

where the worshippers could see Gospel events depicted in paint or in mosaic on the walls of the building. BETANCOURT chooses to 'imagine Hagia Sophia as the site for these manuscripts' use' (p. 4). The great cathedral of Constantinople is altogether exceptional — first because of its enormous size, second because its wall mosaics did not include any narrative scenes which lectionary readings could have 'enlivened'.[3] BETANCOURT focuses on the marble panelling above the west door in the nave (pp. 234–282). He and MICHAEL KELLEHER travelled to Turkey specially in order to photograph it (Figs 97 and 119–120). It features a cross, two curtains, four columns, two birds, eight dolphins, and eight octopi. Its significance 'varied over time and depended on the associations that the congregations wished to make with contemporaneous visual culture inside and outside the church' (p. 27). Because this particular section of the panelling once faced the pulpit from which the Gospel was read, it 'begins to reveal long-standing associations between the reading of the Gospel lectionary and the promised heavenly paradise, the fountains of paradise, and the tomb of Christ' (p. 27).

Beside the architectural context of Gospel readings, BETANCOURT considers 'the sonic utterance of the lections in the liturgy' (p. 196). This is a very difficult subject, since no musicologist can exactly interpret the special 'ekphonetic' signs found in lectionaries.[4] Anyway, 'the guiding principle of the ekphonetic notations appears to be to stress and bring out the narrative of the story, responding astutely to the syntax and composition of the verses' (p. 210). In Mark 16:16,[5] for instance, 'the narrative… begins soberly, then drops in pitch to emphasize σωθήσεται and rises as the verse ends to give sonic resolution to the line…. The utterance "will be saved" is given an emphasis in its utterance, and its sonorous drop in pitch gives it added gravitas as it reverberates in the space of the church' (p. 215).

BETANCOURT teaches at the University of California. In the course of a lecture, he could probably intone σωθήσεται the way he thinks eleventh-century lectors intoned it and thus show what he means by 'sonorous drop in pitch'. Dealing as it does with 'images that flicker across multiple readings

[3] There was, exceptionally, an image of Pentecost in one of the vaults of the cathedral's gallery. It was not easy to see it from the nave.

[4] BETANCOURT calls them also 'chant marks' (pp. 208–209, 215, 217).

[5] BETANCOURT (p. 215) uses as an example f. 34v in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007.286. It has the exact same notation as the one seen on the upper right of the page here; compare the slightly different notation in the middle of the left-hand column here.

and spectrums of possibility' (p. 3), his book contains many other passages in need of explanation. What is 'the textual body of the Gospel of John' (p. 136)? How can 'initials, miniatures, and adjoining marginalia' *empower* their users (p. 113)? Why did these users need 'to make visible the text on the page' (p. 113) – was it not visible in the first place? I have no doubt that this is all good English, since the editors at Cambridge University Press approved of it.[6] It is just that I find it unnecessarily convoluted and vague.[7]

It remains to stress the book's positive contributions to scholarship. BETANCOURT urges us to see Greek manuscripts in context. He emphasises that their text was once read out loud to an audience of avid listeners. He shows how challenging their study can be. He reminds us of our duty to think and write clearly.

Keywords
liturgy; performance

[6]Those responsible for the book were MICHAEL SHARP, DAMIAN LOVE, ALICE FALK, and ALEAH HERNANDEZ (p. xxi).

[7]E.g. 'lacked direct visual contact' (p. 131) instead of 'could not see', or 'the difference between omega and omicron, while deeply connected and assimilated in certain pronunciations of Greek, still would have borne a certain distinctiveness' (p. 64) instead of 'the Greek letters ω and o sound the same but look different'.