Leaf from a German Bible, chiefly comprising of lines from Leviticus, Chapter 27

Background to the Tisch Leaf:

This leaf is from Anton Koberger’s 17 February, 1483 edition of the Bible in German. Koberger produced between 1000-1500 Bibles in this two volume edition, and the book was sold in three versions: uncolored; colored using only ochre, green and purple; and fully colored with gold leaf. 1 The Tisch leaf is from the first volume, which contained the Books of the Old Testament and the Apocalypse.

Anton Koberger was a German printer based in Nuremberg. Koberger was trained as a goldsmith, but the printing house he established would turn into one of the most important forces on the international printing market. The Koberger printing house turned out some 200 editions prior to 1500 and his workshop had 24 manual presses, with 100 assistants to operate them. 2 Koberger is also notable as the godfather of Northern Renaissance Master Albrecht Dürer, whose illustrations for his Apocalypse cycle were influenced by the images in the 1483 Bible. 3 At Koberger’s death in 1513 the printing business was taken over by his cousin, Hans Koberger. Financial difficulties after 1500 would eventually lead to the abandonment of the publishing and book trade by the house in 1532 and the dissolution of the printing workshop. 4

The 1483 Bible is the only Bible that Koberger printed in the vernacular. However, during the period following the invention of print and before Luther’s September Testament was published in 1522, eighteen Bibles were to be printed in German. 5 The 1483 Bible is therefore symptomatic of a larger interest in accessing the word of God in the vernacular, an interest Koberger no doubt sought to profit from. 6 The first Bible printed in German was that of Johann Mentelin, printed in 1466, but Koberger’s own translation is based on that of Günther Zainer, who printed the fourth German translation of the Bible in 1475. 7 The modifications by Koberger to Mentelin’s original produce a vernacular translation of the text that is often thought of as the most fluid of the Pre-Lutheran German Bibles. 8

The specific combination of text in the German vernacular and images in the Bible provides evidence for Koberger’s target demographic. In the original preface to the Quentell Bible the images are said to serve an illustrative role which makes the text easier to understand, comparative to the role of paintings in churches and monasteries. 9

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4 Catholic Encyclopedia, pg 685.
8 O’Hear, pg. 139.
combination of instructive images and a vernacular text increases the Bible’s readability and makes it an attractive option for lay use. The readability of Koberger’s Bible is in stark contrast to the early printed Latin editions—which apart from being printed in Latin, were also not illustrated.  

Despite the ‘readability’ of Koberger’s text—there are certain characteristics of the book that make it clear practically was not its principle aim. The book itself is very large and rather cumbersome, only slightly smaller in size than the monumental Gutenberg Bible. The choice of such a large size makes it unlikely that such an object would be purchased for purely devotional use. Additionally, Koberger’s production of a portion of Bibles in a deluxe version in full color and complete with gold leaf, combined with their large scale, certainly make them a potential exemplar of status.  

The choice of such a monumental size makes a very specific statement. The Gutenberg Bible’s formal qualities like scale and type are a nod to the monumental lectern Bibles monasteries would have chained on display, and at least some of Gutenberg’s initial motivation for printing his Bible may have been to take advantage of the monasteries’ wide demand for such books. The 1483 Bible may have wished to harness both the grandiosity of this tradition of lectern Bibles, while also taking advantage of the rising demand for German Bibles, albeit by a distinctively wealthy German audience. Perhaps this combination proved less successful than Koberger anticipated, because although he printed over fifteen editions of the Bible in Latin this was his single edition in German.  

Iconography of the Tisch Leaf:

The Tisch leaf is notable for its striking woodcut depiction of the “Meeting before Mount Sinai”, hand-colored in orange, red, green, and yellow with a red frame. Of the 111 woodcuts found in Koberger’s Bible, 109 are based on those found in a Bible published in Cologne in 1478 by Bartholomaeus von Unkel and Heinrich Quentell. There are also interesting corollaries between the Quentell cycle and that of a manuscript in the Berlin Library (codex germ. 516) although it is debated as to whether this manuscript itself served as a model for the Cologne woodcuts. Following Koberger’s use of these woodcuts, the illustrations became a model for the illustrations of many German Bibles and Dürer’s Apocalypse.

The woodcut on the Tisch folio illustrates the text of Leviticus 26:26-27:34, found on the recto and verso of the page. Leviticus is traditionally held to be the word of God as dictated to Moses in the desert. The chapter enumerates the various rules for sacrifices, ordination of priests, holy worship, and other issues which lay out the framework for a way of life lived in accordance with God’s will. It is accordance with these various

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10 O’Hear. Pg 139.
11 ibid. pg. 32.
13 Catholic Encyclopedia, pg 685.
14 Price, pg 38.
15 Strachan. pg 12.
rules that ensures the continued presence of God within the community of the Israelites, where he resides in the Holy of Holies of the Tent of Meeting.  

Illustrations of the story of Moses often show him communicating with God, and it is this aspect of communication from Leviticus that is highlighted in the Koberger woodcut. At the top left, we see an image of God cross-nimbed and appearing in a cloud before Moses and the Israelites; the camp of the Israelites in the background. God’s appearance as well as the dove that flies from his right hand, raised as if in a gesture of speech, serves to illustrated God’s dispensing of the holy rite to Moses. In turn Moses’ position, he faces God but turns towards the Israelites, formally illustrates his translation of the word received from God. This does not go unrecognized by the group at right. Their gestures indicate that they are actively receiving these words—the men’s gestures both towards God and themselves indicate recognition of the exchange. The woodcut thus aptly illustrates the translation of the holy rite, highlighting the text’s role as a compendium of laws given directly to the Israelites by God.

Another interesting formal aspect of the woodcut is the ordering of the Israelites, who do not simply gather before Moses but appear to be lined up. This effect is emphasized by the formal characteristics of the image: namely the layered effect created by the numerous hills-painted alternately in green or light yellow. These elements result in a depiction not of a crowd, but of an ordered populous assembled before Moses. This is in marked contrast to depictions of Moses communicating with God where the Israelites are depicted they are represented simply by a few figures which stand in for the whole.

One possibility for the origins of this iconography is found in the contents of Numbers, whose opening is at the very end of the text found on the Tisch leaf. In Numbers, the Israelites are commanded by God to make their first journey since departing from Egypt towards the Promised Land. The line of people progresses in a given direction, from left to right. This left to right movement is mirrored not only by the movements of God and Moses, whose feet appear to be stepping in this direction, but also in the direction of the progression of the text—and thus in the ‘direction’ of the progression of the narrative. The lining up of the Israelites, who as a group appear to progress from left to right, could suggest this final move leading to the conclusion of the Exodus.

Another possibility for the specific depiction of the crowd is found in the contents of Leviticus 27, which the image accompanies. In chapter 27, God gives Moses specific instructions on the values of men, women and children of various ages when someone

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19 Examples include the illustrations from Christherre-Chronik. In an example from a single image of Moses communicating with God is repeated multiple times, see folios.
21 Balentine, pp. 3-9.
22 See Pierpont Morgan 969, folio 63v; Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin - Preussischer Kulturbesitz, inv Ms. germ fol. 516, folio 57v.
23 This interpretation implies a rather complex interaction of text and image, in which image is ‘conscious’ of its role within the text; the correspondence between the direction in which the figures progress and the direction of the text could also be a mere coincidence.
wishes to make a special vow—that is a vow equal to the value of a person—to God. Although the image does not explicitly present all these various persons whose ‘values’ are enumerated, the ‘inventory-like’ quality of the image could suggest some effort to depict God’s categorical possession and right to the Israelite people as a whole, who according to the covenant belong to the Lord.

These are two proposals for the specific nature of the iconography found in the Tisch folio. However, though the Koberger illustrations often fairly explicitly illustrate the contents of the text it is of course possible that the specific depiction of the Israelites in this woodcut does not relate directly to the Biblical text. More research is required to pinpoint the origins and the possible significance of the imagery.

The woodcut of the Tisch folio leaves another question unanswered. Although the text, format, and image itself match other examples of the Koberger Bible, the color on the Tisch folio is at variance with these examples. One issue is the absence of Koberger’s characteristic cinnabar dashes that were used to denote each majuscule and ease the process of reading. This is not a total anomaly, and there are other examples where these dashes are omitted. The other issue is the presence of the red (rather untidily painted) border around the image. Numerous other copies have been checked, and to date no example has been found with this red border, instead they are all framed by a pale yellow border. Aside from this departure, the color scheme used in the woodcut corresponds to that found in the Pierpont Morgan Library edition.

There are two possible solutions to this anomaly: either the copy containing our leaf was sold uncolored and colored by a different workshop later on; or, because the rest of the over-painting is consistent with the Morgan example, it was sold colored and then for some reason the red border was painted over the yellow.

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24 One such example is the Pierpont Morgan Library’s copy of the Koberger 1483 Bible, accession number PML 126004.
26 PML 126004.
Bibliography:


