The Earliest Dated Tree of Jesse Image: Thematically Reconsidered

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The earliest known Tree of Jesse depiction is found in the *Vyšehrad Codex* of Bohemia from the year 1086 (Figure 1).[1] This earliest image is traditionally believed to reflect the similar thematic and iconographic interpretations of subsequent Trees of Jesse. Therefore, it is surprising to find a very different and complex theme emerging upon close study of the Vyšehrad Tree of Jesse illumination.

The uniqueness of this rarely viewed, early image derives partly from medieval Bohemia itself (Figure 2). Bohemia was located to the east of the German duchies and included the territory of Moravia to its east and the kingdom of Poland, which was held in fief.[2] This country shared a long history with its German neighbors throughout the Middle Ages. Starting with the *Vyšehrad Codex*, Bohemia began creating its own artistic style rather than strictly imitating the Bavarian style previously popular in the region.[3] This codex played another historical role as the first manuscript created for a Bohemian monarch. As the Coronation Gospel Book of Vratislav II, the first king of Bohemia, it was housed within the royal chapel of the Vyšehrad palace in Prague.[4]

Another unique quality of this codex lies in the location of the Vyšehrad Tree of Jesse image within the manuscript. The *Vyšehrad Codex* contains numerous illuminations among the texts of the four gospels. The manuscript opens with seven illuminated pages before the Matthew gospel. These pages include a portrait page of the four evangelists (Figure 3), four pages of ancestral portraits depicting Christological lineage (Figure 4), and two pages with four Old Testament scenes (Figures 5 and 1). The Tree of Jesse image is located in the lower register of the second Old Testament page, just before the Matthew Gospel text.

Beginning with the *Vyšehrad Codex*, Trees of Jesse derive from the Old Testament passage of Isaiah 11:1-3.

> And there shall come forth a rod out of the
> root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out

of his root. And the spirit of the Lord shall
rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of
understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of
fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of god-
liness. And he shall be filled with the spirit
of the fear of the Lord.

Medieval Christians interpreted this passage as the prophet Isaiah foretelling the line of Old Testament kings that descended from David, the son of Jesse, through Christ. It is this biblical passage that we find depicted as the Tree of Jesse.

In the Vyšehrad Tree of Jesse, the artist created a literal depiction of this passage. The figure of the prophet Isaiah holds a scroll bearing the text of the Isaiah 11:1-2 biblical passage. The scroll wraps around to embrace the figure of Jesse. From the foot of Jesse, a tree grows up to branch across the upper part of the register. Seven haloed doves representing the gifts of the Holy Spirit perch on the blooming branches of the tree. The Latin inscription across the top of the image reads, "A little rod from Jesse gives rise to a splendid flower."[5] This first Tree of Jesse depiction is characterized by its simplistic and literal composition of elements. At this point one might ask: how does this early image differ from later Trees of Jesse?

While depictions of the Tree of Jesse originated in Bohemia, the concept became widely popular throughout Europe and the British Isles. Within sixty years the composition had exploded and expanded, with rearranged original elements and new ones added. Artists continued to create the Tree images as manuscript illuminations, but also worked in various other media such as stained glass and sculpture. Two of these famous examples, the illumination within the *Lambeth Palace Bible* from England and the stained glass image from Chartres Cathedral in France, exemplify the two typical forms of evolved Jesse Tree depictions.[6]

The *Lambeth Palace Bible* Tree of Jesse image dates to the period between 1140 and 1150 (Figure 6). The composi-

[1] *Vyšehrad Codex*, 1086, Prague, The National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV A 13, 420mm x 330mm, 108 folios.

[2] S. Harrison Thomson, *Czechoslovakia in European History* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1943) 18.

[3] Jan Kvet, intro., *Czechoslovakian Miniatures from Romanesque and Gothic Manuscripts* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1964) 10-14.

[4] Kvet 11; Hanns Swarzenski and Jan Kvet, *Czechoslovakia: Romanesque and Gothic Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1954) 6, 23.

[5] *Virgula de Iesse procedit splendida flore.*

[6] *Tree of Jesse*, from the *Lambeth Palace Bible*, 1140-1150, London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3, folio 198r.

tion of this Tree illumination has developed dramatically and shifted focus somewhat from the Vyšehrad illumination. The figure of Jesse no longer stands, but reclines along the lower page border, while the tree now emerges from his groin. The tree has expanded to fill the entire page and envelops numerous new figures within its rounded branches, including that of the prophet Isaiah. Another new element appearing in this image, the figure of Mary, dominates the page as the new trunk of the tree. From the head of Mary emerges the apex branch, enclosing the bust of Christ and seven doves of the Holy Spirit.

The addition of Mary into twelfth century Trees of Jesse reflects the influence of the Cult of Mary, which arose during that century. It was during this period that the Church answered questions regarding Mary's role as the mother of the divine Christ in human form.[7] As a result, Mary became a focal figure within Christianity. By placing Mary in a prominent position on this tree between the figures of Jesse and Christ, the artist emphasized Mary's role in the economy of salvation.

The Chartres Tree of Jesse dates to the period of 1145 to 1150.[8] It was designed as a tall lancet shaped window over the entrance portals of the western façade. In this version, the tree also grows upwards from the groin of a reclined figure of Jesse to fill the entire window. Isaiah and other Old Testament prophets flank both sides of the tree, while portraits of enthroned Old Testament figures ascend the tree trunk. The figure of King David is located nearest to that of his father Jesse, while figures of King Solomon and two other kings are also represented. The artist depicted Mary next as the fifth enthroned figure leading to Christ at the apex and the surrounding seven doves of the Holy Spirit.

Along with the evolved elaborate tree form, this image exhibits two new thematic elements: genealogy portraits and the figure of Mary. Unlike the Vyšehrad artist who illuminated four pages of Christ's ancestors separately from the Tree of Jesse image, the Chartres artist combined the two types of images and created a Jesse Tree that literally symbolizes the royal genealogy of Christ. As mentioned in relation to the Lambeth Tree, the appearance of Mary relates to the twelfth century Marian cult. The location of the Tree of Jesse window above the cathedral entrance served as a symbol of Mary to whom Chartres cathedral was dedicated.

These two Trees of Jesse illustrate the complex evolved forms, thematic shifts and iconological interpretations within the tradition of Jesse Tree imagery. Since the first half of the twelfth century, Trees of Jesse were created to symbolize either Mary's role in the birth of Christ, and likewise Christian-

ity, or the royal genealogy of Christ through the lineage of King David, or both. Modern medieval scholarship has focused on the twelfth century Marian and genealogical themes, applying these interpretations to all Trees of Jesse including the Vyšehrad image.[9] I believe that Marian interpretations do not apply to the Vyšehrad Tree of Jesse and that the image was intended as a symbol of more than just royal Christological genealogy.

As mentioned above, the *Vyšehrad Codex* opens with the gospel account of Matthew, which is immediately preceded by the Tree of Jesse illumination. This positioning cannot be accidental, but instead suggests a connection between the prophetic passage from Isaiah about Christ's lineage and the opening verses of the Matthew gospel containing a genealogical account from Abraham to Christ. The existence of the four genealogy pages preceding the Old Testament scenes further exemplifies the artist's awareness of this biblical connection.

The ancestors depicted on the genealogy pages and found listed in the gospel text need to be briefly examined. Careful observation reveals that the lineage from Abraham through the Davidic royal house to Christ passes through Joseph rather than Mary.[10] The Vyšehrad artist did depict Mary in an illumination of the Nativity found amidst the Luke gospel text (Figure 7). In this scene, Mary reclines along the bottom picture plane while the swaddled Christ child blesses the arrival of shepherds and an angel with Joseph standing beside the manger. The prominent positioning of Joseph alongside Christ in this image, instead of Mary, further exemplifies the lineage through Joseph from the Matthew text. Therefore we can conclude that no Marian iconography was intended for the first Tree of Jesse depiction.

If the Vyšehrad Tree image cannot be interpreted as a symbol of Mary or her role in the birth of Christ, as accepted by modern medieval scholars, then what prompted the artist to create the image? For this answer we must turn to the three remaining Old Testament scenes. The two pages containing the four Old Testament scenes differ in composition from the other manuscript illuminations. Each page contains two scenes divided into registers and enclosed by a single border. A script in Latin across the top of each register identifies each scene.

The first scene depicts Moses before the burning bush, as found in the book of Exodus (3:1-10). The script across the register reads, "What a wondrous event, the bush bloomed unharmed even as it burns."[11] The importance of this image lies in the theophanic revelation and the theological understanding of the event for Christians. This event is one in which God appeared to Moses especially to procure his services as

[7] For information on the Cult of Mary please see Jean LeClercq, "Grandeur et misère de la dèvotion mariale au moyen âge," *Maison-Dieu* 38 (1954) 122-135 and Marina Warner, *Alone of Her Sex: the Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Alfred P. Knopf, Inc., 1976) 121-160.

[8] For an image of the Chartres Tree of Jesse window refer to Arthur Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1934) plate xxiv and Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art* (London: Lund Humphries Publishers Limited, 1971) plate 30.

[9] Watson, vii-viii, 78, 84; Kvet 11; Schiller 16; C. R. Dodwell, *The Pictorial Arts of the West: 800-1200* (New Haven: Yale UP) 309.

[10] Marshall Johnson, *The Purpose of Biblical Genealogies, with Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969) 141.

[11] *Res miranda viret rubus integer et tam[en] ardet.*

savior of the Israelites held captive in Egypt. Since early Christian times this Old Testament event has been equated with that of God sending his son to be the savior of all Christians through the incarnation of Jesus.[12] Therefore, Moses served as a prefiguration of Christ and a figure of salvation.

The second scene occupies the lower register of the same page and represents the story of the blossoming rod of Aaron found in the book of Numbers (17:1-18:8). The script across the register reads, "Against the customary law, a small withered rod bears fruit."[13] In this image the twelve heads of the Israelite houses watch as Aaron's rod of the Levite house blooms before the Ark of the Covenant. According to the scripture passage, it was the will of God that one of the Israelite houses should be designated to perform the priestly duties for the Israelite people. As depicted here, God chose the Levite family by causing their rod to blossom.

The theophanic impact of this biblical event held two meanings in eleventh century medieval society. The concept of divine election to office was one of great importance in the Old Testament and was resurrected for use by the Carolingian, Ottonian, and Salian kings of Germany.[14] Also important are two biblical accounts of Aaron's consecration, which describe Moses anointing him with holy oil.[15] Therefore, the image of the rod of Aaron symbolized divine election of medieval Germanic kings, as well as their practice of anointing with holy oil, which confirmed the royal status of a medieval Christian monarch.

In the third scene, a figure stands before a golden archway set into an architectural structure that fills the entire register. The script across this register reads, "The king enters the closed gate; he looks back upon his rising."[16] The scriptural passage that corresponds to this scene can be found in the book of Ezekiel (44:1-3). The Old Testament passage tells of a closed gate in a porch that only the God of Israel and a prince may pass through. In the Vyšehrad image, the artist depicted the image of a Christian medieval king and labeled him as such in the script across the register.[17] The depiction of

a king within a biblical setting restricted for a prince suggests that the prince has become a king. The Vyšehrad artist seems to be making this very point, as his inscription speaks of a king that has newly risen. This information helps to identify the figure of the monarch as the newly consecrated King Vratislav II of Bohemia, who reigned from 1061 to 1086 as a prince and from 1086 to 1092 as a king.

From the late ninth century, the Přemyslid family of Vratislav II had been the ruling princes of Bohemia and eastern Moravia.[18] Throughout this period, two forms of Christian liturgy were permitted to coexist in Bohemia and were sanctioned by the papacy in Rome.[19] In the year 1073 during the reign of Prince Vratislav II, Pope Gregory VII came to power in Rome and forbade the continuance of the vernacular Bohemian liturgy known as the Slavonic Rite.[20] Pope Gregory insisted that all Christian nations practice the Latin Rite and refused Vratislav's repeated requests to renew canonical recognition of the Slavonic Rite. Besides the religious reasons cited by the pope, his refusal was based on personal reasons as well. Vratislav II had maintained an active and loyal friendship with King Henry IV of Germany throughout his reign, including the two periods when Pope Gregory VII had excommunicated Henry as well as deposed him as king.[21] Therefore it came as no surprise when Vratislav II joined his Bohemian forces to those of Henry IV in opposing the pope in 1082.[22] Their siege of Rome lasted until 21 March 1084. During Easter Mass on 31 March 1084, Henry IV ensured the installation of the anti-Pope, Clement III, as head of the Church and Clement III consecrated Henry IV as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.[23] As compensation for his services, Vratislav II was elevated from the status of prince to king by the new Holy Roman Emperor in the summer of 1086.[24] The newly founded status of Bohemia as a kingdom with Vratislav II at its helm was later ratified by a papal confirmation from Clement III as well.[25]

The figure of Vratislav II within the Closed Gate image appears dressed much like the medieval German monarchs

12 Schiller 15.

13 *Contra ius solitu[m] parit arida virgula fructum.*

14 1 Kings 8:16; 1 Kings 16:1-23; R. H. C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe, from Constantine to Saint Louis* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1958) 128; Henry A. Myers, *Medieval Kingship* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, Inc., 1982) 107.

15 Exodus 29:1-46; Leviticus 8:1-36.

16 *Clausa rex porta penetrat que respicit ortum.*

17 Refer to fn. 15 above.

18 Thomson 16-18.

19 Kvet 10; Stephen Smrzík, S. J., *The Glagolitic or Roman-Slavonic Liturgy* (Rome: Slovak Institute, 1959) 14.

20 Rev. Horace K. Mann, *The Lives of the Popes in the Middle Ages* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Company, Limited, 1925) vol. VII, 202-3.

21 F. L. Ganshof, *Feudalism* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1964) 76; Mann 100-1, 120-3, 146.

22 Franz Palacky, *Würdigung der alten böhmischen Geschichtschreiber* (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1969) 133. This source is a translation of the Bohemian court chronicles written by Cosmas, Dean of Prague Cathedral (1045-1125). The chronicles consist of three volumes and are extremely valuable sources for the political and religious events of medieval Bohemia. For the original Latin text of the chronicles refer to Cosmas of Prague, *Chronica Boemorum*, ed. B. Bretholz (1955).

23 Palacky 134 and Fuhrmann Horst, *Germany in the High Middle Ages c.1050-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 68.

24 Palacky 135, 138.

25 R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1964) 27.

(Figure 8). He also bears the symbols of his new office: a crown, scepter and staff decorated with a triple lobed symbol of the Trinity and the cross. We know from the contemporary Bohemian court chronicler, Cosmas, that the Archbishop of Trier anointed Vratislav II in the Carolingian and Ottonian fashion during his coronation Mass in Prague on 15 June 1086.[26] His portrait placed within the setting of the biblical scene from Ezekiel, and among the other Old Testament images, was unusual and yet politically astute.

While the figure of Vratislav II does not fit into the events of the Old Testament images, these events do coincide with the figure of King Vratislav II. The new Bohemian monarch is equated with the salvific figure of Moses for his efforts to ensure the continuance of the Slavonic Rite for his people. Aaron's blossoming rod represents his recent divine election to kingship by Emperor Henry IV, and confirmed by holy anointing. The text from Ezekiel provided an original setting to symbolize Vratislav's passage from the status of a prince to a king. This biblical event coincides with the image of the Tree of Jesse and they are appropriately positioned on the same page. Just as the gate image represents a passageway utilized solely by God and the prince, so the Tree of Jesse represents the royal Christological genealogy to which all Christian monarchs claim to belong. One might even suggest that the

Vyšehrad artist positioned the portrait of Vratislav, with his feet stepping across into the lower register, so that he appears at the apex of the Tree of Jesse as the newest member in the Davidic royal house.

The compilation of the four Old Testament scenes were intentional as a grouping and strategically positioned between the genealogy pages and the royal ancestral lineage for Christ which opens the Matthew gospel. They collectively speak of Vratislav's newly achieved kingship and his actions that ensured this highly honored status. In order to understand the creation of Tree of Jesse imagery, this first image within the *Vyšehrad Codex* must be seen as part of a thematic grouping. This political theme celebrates the extraordinary kingship of Vratislav II of Bohemia. The uniqueness of this image lies in its function within a set of images, which are symbols of salvific leadership, divine election and medieval Christian kingship as a continuation of Old Testament kingship. While subsequent Trees of Jesse can be correctly interpreted as having Marian iconography and symbolizing the genealogy of Christ, these interpretations should not be associated as such with the Vyšehrad Tree. Its unique theme is part of a complex message, refering to the 1086 coronation of King Vratislav II of Bohemia for whom the codex was commissioned.

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[26]   For coronation information refer to fn. 23 above and Boyd H. Hill, Jr., *The Rise of the First Reich Germany in the Tenth Century* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1969) 9-15.
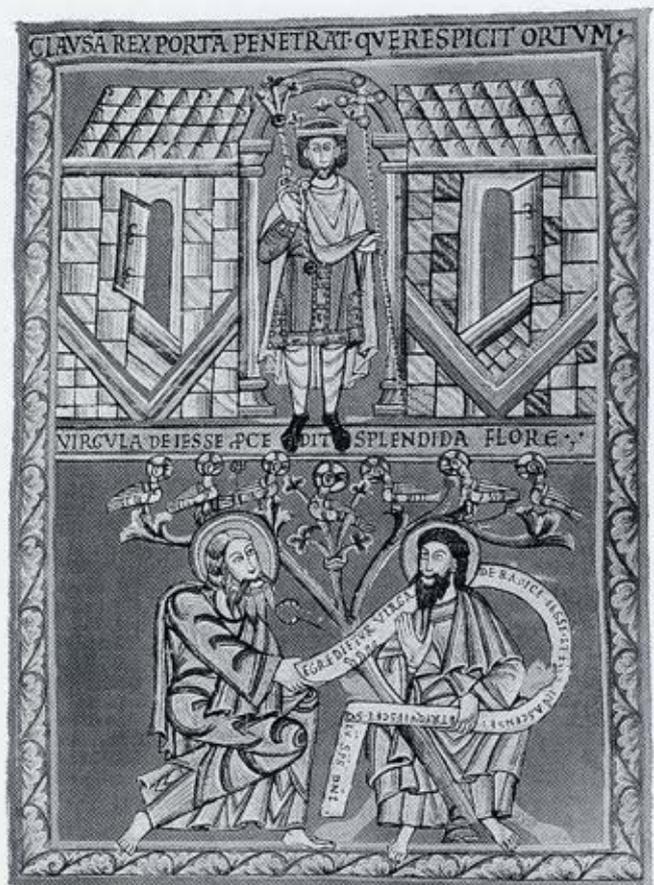

Figure 1. *Enclosed Gate* (upper register) and *Tree of Jesse* (lower register). *Vyšehrad Codex*, 1086, Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV A 13, 420 mm x 330 mm, folio 4v. Reprinted with the permission of the National Library of the Czech Republic.

Figure 2. Political map of the German duchies and Bohemia in the 10th - 11th centuries. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

[lower left] Figure 3. *Portrait page of the four Evangelists. Vyšehrad Codex*, 1086, Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV A 13, 420 mm x 330 mm, folio 1v. Reprinted with the permission of the National Library of the Czech Republic.

[lower right] Figure 4. *Genealogy of Christ* (fourth and last page of genealogy portraits). *Vyšehrad Codex*, 1086, Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV A 13, 420 mm x 330 mm, folio 3v. Reprinted with the permission of the National Library of the Czech Republic.
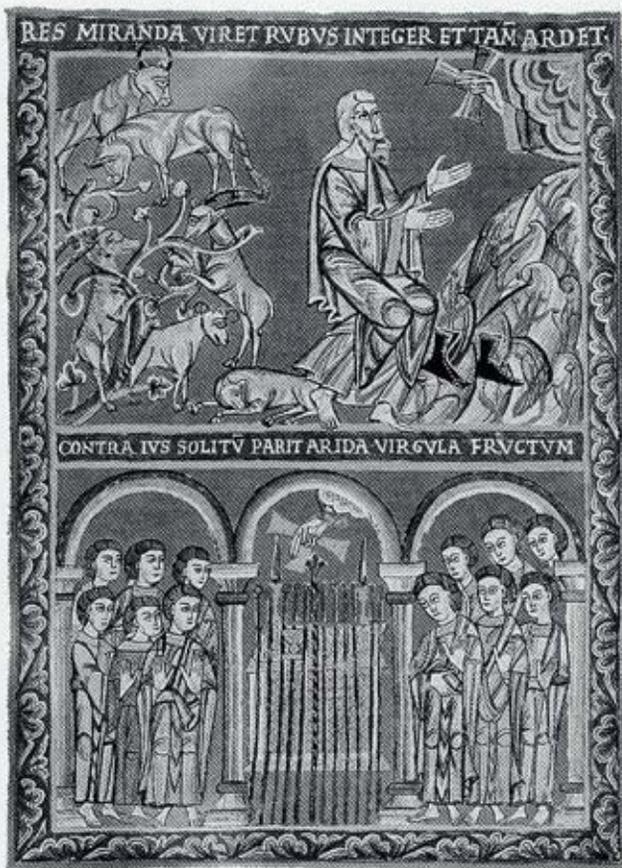
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Figure 5. *Burning Bush of Moses* and *Blossoming Rod of Aaron. Vyšehrad Codex*, 1086, Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV A 13, 420 mm x 330 mm, folio 4r. Reprinted with the permission of the National Library of the Czech Republic.

Figure 6. *Tree of Jesse. Lambeth Palace Bible*, 1140-1150, London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 3, folio 198r. Courtesy of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Trustees of the Lambeth Palace Library.

Figure 7. *Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds. Vyšehrad Codex*, 1086, Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV A 13, 420 mm x 330 mm, folio 8r. Reprinted with the permission of the National Library of the Czech Republic.

Figure 8. *Coronation of the Emperor*. Line drawing of a page from the *Bamburg Sacramentary* of the Emperor Henry II, Munich Staatsbibliothek 4456. Figure 29 from J. Henry Middleton, *Illuminated Manuscripts in Classical and Medieval Times, Their Art and Their Technique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892).