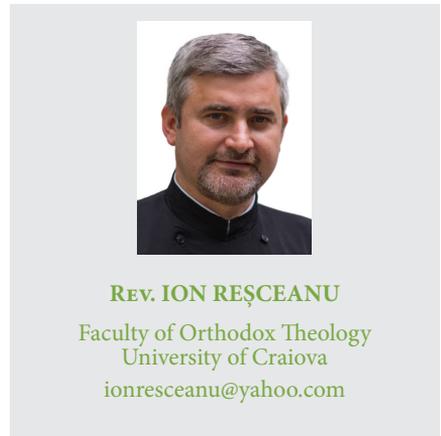


THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF ILLUMINATIONS IN BYZANTINE OLD TESTAMENT MANUSCRIPTS

Abstract

The present study aims to explore the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament through the illustrations found in Byzantine biblical manuscripts, particularly those specific to the Byzantine Octateuch. The illustrations in the Octateuch continue the earlier Byzantine iconographic tradition, highlighting the Christological significance while appropriately employing typology without overusing symbols. For the Byzantines, typology was the most effective method for showcasing the Christological nature of the entire Old Testament, a perspective that can also be examined through the illustrated Octateuch.



Keywords

Old Testament, Octateuch, illuminations, typology, Christology

Introduction

The Christological interpretation of the Old Testament can be defined as a consistent theme throughout the patristic period and, more broadly, within the life of the Christian Church during the first millennium. From the beginning, this interpretation aimed to affirm the Church's identity of faith based on the Holy Scriptures, which were viewed as a unified whole intended to reveal Christ. The Church Fathers and early Christian writers employed a typological hermeneutical approach to highlight the person and saving work of Christ in their scriptural commentaries. Rev. E. Pentiuc emphasizes that

the Christological interpretation is perhaps the most well-known and widespread Christian example of typological interpretation, which in turn is based on one of the

ancient Christian and Jewish hermeneutical premises—that the Bible is a perfectly harmonious document (Pentiuc 2019, 234).

The Christological aspects of the Old Testament are primarily traced from the second Christian century onward. St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher is recognized as the first Church Father to introduce this perspective on reading the Holy Scriptures. He exemplified this approach by practicing “a way” that our Lord Jesus Christ himself opened in the New Testament. He also initiated the Christological interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures during his conversation with Luke and Cleopas on the Road to Emmaus, when “beginning with Moses and the prophets, he interpreted to them from all the scriptures about Himself” (Lk 24:27) (Pentiuc 2019, 234).

Over time, the patristic commentaries formed a comprehensive exegetical tradition that the Byzantine world sought to unify. This unification was achieved through chains of linked commentaries that often accompanied biblical texts in Byzantine manuscripts. Simultaneously, during the early Byzantine period of the 4th and 5th centuries, a visual tradition emerged, aiming to synthesize the biblical text through illuminations that adorned it. These illuminations gradually became standardized, ultimately providing the foundational inspiration for Byzantine iconography in all its expressions and significance within liturgical spaces.

In the following pages, we aim to highlight specific aspects that are often underrepresented in our specialized literature, particularly the Christological character of the illuminations in Byzantine Old Testament manuscripts. We will explore how these illuminations enhance the biblical text and reflect the exegetical tradition of the Eastern Church. Our focus will be on the Byzantine Octateuch, a type of Old Testament manuscript that reflects a well-defined tradition within the Byzantine cultural and theological context of the Middle period (843-1204), particularly regarding the interpretation of biblical texts through a Christological lens.

The Byzantine Octateuch

The Octateuch is a book format that follows the principle of the Pentateuch. It includes the first eight books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. Theodoret of Cyr (d. 466) commented on these first eight books without using the term “Octateuch,” which was later recorded by Procopius of Gaza (d. 538).

Generally, the Octateuch is recognized as a less common book format specific to the Byzantine world, primarily intended for the aristocracy. Its liturgical or anagogic role is somewhat limited.

K. Weitzmann argues that the origins of the illuminations in the Octateuch can be traced back to the pre-Constantinian period. He suggests that the Hebrew illuminated manuscripts created by Hellenized Jews in the region between Alexandria and Antioch, which are now lost, may have served as an initial source for the Christian iconography of the Old Testament. In the absence of conclusive evidence, Weitzmann examines the frescoes discovered in the synagogue at Dura-Europos (Syria), dating from the 3rd century A.D. He regards these frescoes as a crucial connection between the theorized Jewish manuscripts and Christian illuminated manuscripts (Weitzmann and Bernabò 1999, 299–311; Pentiuć 2019, 333–4). On the other hand, J. Lowden connects the origins of the illustrated Octateuch to the Middle Byzantine period, viewing it as a significant innovation of the Eastern world (Lowden 2010, 109). The debate remains unresolved, especially considering the recent discovery of a mosaic depicting Samson tying torches to the tails of foxes in a synagogue at Huqoq, near Capernaum, from the fourth and fifth centuries. This finding may provide additional insights into the intersection of Jewish and Christian traditions in terms of iconographic representation (Grey and Magness 2013: 1–30).

Currently, only six illuminated manuscripts are preserved, all of which date from between 1050 and 1300. These works reflect an earlier tradition that was maintained, without significant improvements, until the Palaiologos era. The later manuscripts aimed to uphold this tradition, leading to interdependence among them in terms of text, decorative chains, and illuminations. However, one of the six, BML MS Laur. Plut. 5.38 from Florence, has a different structure. Unlike the others, it lacks a catena, preface, or epilogue (Lowden 2010, 110). Initially dated between 1050 and 1075, this manuscript has been re-evaluated from a palaeographic perspective. Italian specialists now propose that it dates from the early part of the Palaiologos era (1275-1300) (Perria and Iacobini 1999, 69–111).

The six manuscripts that have been preserved are the following:

1. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), MS Vat. gr. 747 (ca. 1050-1075).
2. Smyrna – Evangelical School, MS A 1 (ca. 1125-1055) – was probably destroyed in 1922.

3. Istanbul – Topkapı Saray, MS gr. 8 (ca. 1125-1155).
4. Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV), MS Vat. gr. 746 (ca. 1125-1155).
5. Vatoped Monastery – MS 602. (ca. 1270-1300).
6. Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (BML) Florence, Ms. Laur. Plut. 5.38 (ca. 1050-1075?) or (1275-1300)

The Role of Illuminations in the Byzantine Octateuch

John Lowden posits that the illuminations included in the Octateuch served a purpose beyond merely providing visual enjoyment for readers. He notes that the Octateuch was studied privately by members of the imperial family and the aristocracy, which suggests that the inclusion of these illuminations may have had deeper significance. While the exact reason remains uncertain, Lowden believes it warrants further investigation (Lowden 2010, 151).

The illuminations were added after the text and accompanying comments, notably seen in the Topkapı Octateuch, which contains no less than 86 free spaces designated for illuminations that were ultimately not created by the miniaturist artist (Takaguchi 2017, 216). While one might logically expect a complete integration of text, commentary, and image, the reality is quite different. According to J. Lowden, the extensive marginal commentaries found in the catenae of the Octateuchs do not appear to influence the content of the illuminations (Lowden 2010, 150). These commentaries are indeed intricate and reflect a high academic standard, synthesizing and highlighting an entire patristic tradition. Furthermore, the illuminations feature scenes that depict themes with historical or liturgical significance, which have entered the Church's tradition through apocryphal writings. R. Jensen notes that these illuminations allow access to a religious context that extends beyond the biblical narrative, incorporating commentaries, homilies, and exegetical treatises of a liturgical or theological nature—all of which represent the Church's established tradition at that time (Jensen 2007, 68). In summary, the Octateuch is structurally connected to the Church's earlier traditions, capitalizing on textual and commentary levels, as well as through the images and illuminations included in such codices.

Unlike the primary period, in which images typically have a symbolic and allusive character, the middle and late Byzantine periods demand an immediate concreteness that reflects the tradition of the Church. In this context, visual representations are not merely allusions or hints for the viewer or reader; instead, they are rich and complex

narratives that aim to capture as much of the story as possible. The selection of images, their composition, and the surrounding context serve to illuminate the meaning of the entire story or highlight key moments, even if sometimes it reduces to the presentation of a single fragment of text (Jensen 2007, 68).

In the case of the Byzantine Octateuch, the meaning of an image cannot exist independently of its narrative or literary context. Its advantage is that it can be entirely detached from the biblical references to which it relates. Although the illuminations can be viewed and interpreted individually, they generally resonate and reinforce one another to enhance the understanding of the story and emphasize its defining aspects. The purpose of the illuminations is to maintain the coherence of the narrative; one of the miniaturist artist's goals is to solidify the knowledge acquired by the viewer or reader. Consequently, these illuminations reveal an essential aspect of their didactic and pedagogical function. It is important to note that the illuminations remain effective only as long as this didactic and pedagogical purpose is fulfilled.

We should not view the didactic function of an illumination as its only purpose, as it does not exclude other functions, such as anagogic or liturgical aspects (Speiser 2017, 6). To achieve this, the artist or illuminator must incorporate mimetic elements, as F. Young suggests. This approach invites a deeper understanding of the biblical narrative, which is visually represented in a typological manner (Young 1977, 153). In some cases, these references are explicit, such as in the representation of Christ within a celestial nimbus in a limited number of illuminations. These depictions help guide the viewer toward discovering the "hidden meaning" that leads directly to Christ.

This method assumes a certain level of "theological literacy" and familiarity with the Church's exegetical tradition. Such knowledge enables the viewer to notice specific compositional details and understand the profound meanings present in the illuminations, as well as in the biblical texts to which they refer.

From an anagogical perspective, the illuminations of the Octateuch, along with other artistic representations of the Old Testament, should guide readers and viewers toward Christ. Without Christ, the Old Testament cannot be fully understood. Eastern artists and exegetes emphasize the Christological nature of the Old Testament in their illuminations, aiming to highlight the relevance and prophetic nature of the Hebrew Bible while maintaining its historical truth. As R. Jensen notes, "Unless the stories were both authoritative and true, their Christian significance would be undermined" (Jensen 2007, 74).

Old Testament Exemplification

In general, the illuminating artists of the Byzantine Octateuchs aimed to remain faithful to the literary meaning of the biblical text. Therefore, it is not surprising that the miniaturists in the first part of the Book of Genesis did not attempt to emphasize a Christological character in the scenes depicting the creation of the world and humanity, even though typological exegetical tradition would have allowed for such interpretations. Themes such as the creation of the world and humanity by the Incarnate Logos in the image of Christ, the contrast between Adam the Old and Adam the New (Christ), or the promise of a deliverer remain at the narrative level, depicted according to traditions established in earlier centuries. Only the scene of Cain and Abel, in which Abel is portrayed as a shepherd, can somewhat suggest a typological connection to Christ as the “Good Shepherd” due to its mimetic character. Similarly, although Noah is another biblical figure rich with typological significance—marked by associations between the floodwaters and Christian baptism, as well as the noetic ark and the Church (Giannoulis 2017, 205)—the illuminations related to him do not carry a Christological dimension but remain at a descriptive, narrative level.

However, Abraham’s situation fundamentally changes in relation to the connection between the promise and its fulfillment. A series of typological aspects is automatically activated through which the revelation of Christ Himself is foreshadowed (Breck 2003, 40).



Fig. 1 Abraham and Melchizedek
(VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, row 68r)

The first scene in the cycle dedicated to the patriarch Abraham that captures our attention is his meeting with Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews establishes a strong typological relationship between Melchizedek (the type) and Christ (the antitype). This relationship is based on a hierarchy of eternal significance: “For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham [...] without a father, without a mother, without lineage, having neither the beginning of days nor the end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever” (Heb 7:1-3). Interestingly, the illumination specific to the Octateuch does not emphasize the “sacrifice” that Melchizedek offered, which consisted of bread and wine. Instead, it focuses on the “tithe” that Abraham gave to him (Gn 14:18-20). Although the “sacrifice” is presented to Abraham in the form of loaves and wine vessels, the scene centres on Abraham, depicted with outstretched arms as he gives tithes. This act is also repeated in a higher plane of illumination, where Abraham appears in the same pose, this time before St. John the Baptist (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, row 68r). In a typological context, one might expect a parallel scene featuring Abraham and Christ in the higher plane of illumination. However, this is not the case; instead, the focus is on St. John the Baptist, who is likely associated with the Levitical priesthood through his father, Zacharias. Thus, it appears that the illuminator is referencing Heb 7:4 and following, where the Levitical priesthood is embedded in a complex typological relationship through Abraham’s prefigurative acts. Moreover, this typological association with St. John the Baptist seems to be introduced in the previous chapter by St. Paul, who speaks of the Lord’s entrance “beyond the iconostasis,” stating that: “Jesus entered for us as a forerunner, becoming high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 6:19-20). Overall, the scene emphasizes the “tithe” that Abraham gives to Melchizedek and to John the Baptist, who blesses this merciful act. Nonetheless, this scene warrants a more extensive and in-depth analysis.

Abraham’s hospitality toward the three angels (Fig. 2) is depicted in the illuminations specific to the Octateuch through two distinct scenes. In the first scene, Abraham welcomes them while prostrating before them, and in the second scene, the three angels are feasted under the Mamre oak. In both scenes, Abraham receives a blessing from the angel of the Lord, who is positioned among the three figures, which gives these scenes a Christological significance. Moreover, in the oldest preserved Octateuch, VAT. gr. 747, the angel of the Lord who bestows the blessing is shown with a halo containing a cross, like Christ, which leaves no room for misunderstanding (VAT. gr. 747, row 39r).

The Christological aspect of the two scenes, in which the angel of the Lord blesses Abraham while in the company of the three angels, is further emphasized in VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, folio 73r.

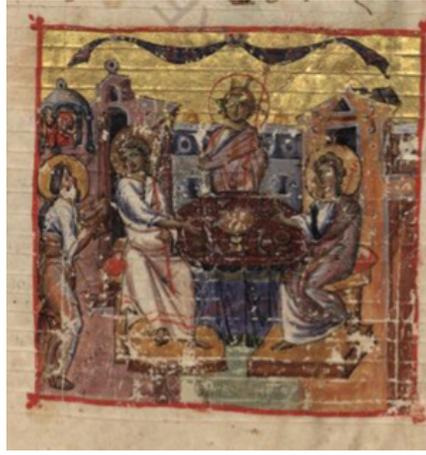


Fig. 2. Abraham and the Three Angels (VAT. gr. 747, tab 39r)



Fig. 3. Abraham and Sarah (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, tab 73r)

This manuscript introduces a new scene in which Christ Himself, represented by a heavenly nimbus, blesses Abraham and Sarah (Fig. 3). This moment likely refers

to the announcement made by one of the angels regarding the birth of a child through whom the Lord's promises would be fulfilled (Gn 18:10-15). Therefore, what Abraham witnesses at the Mamre oak tree can be interpreted as a theophany, with its mysteries to be fully revealed at the "fullness of time."

The Christological perspective on the moment of the appearance of the three angels at the Mamre Oak has not become definitively established in the broader understanding of the Church since the fourth century, when this scene began to reappear in Christian iconography. This ongoing ambivalence arises because many of the Church Fathers were reluctant to entirely abandon the Trinitarian interpretation, which they long regarded as a valid exegetical alternative (Bucur 2015, 253-259). Initially, the strongly Christological depiction of the three angels at the Mamre Oak, arranged in a line—as seen in the catacombs on the Via Latina (4th century), the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore (5th century), and San Vitale in Ravenna (6th century)—began to shift towards another representation gradually. This new portrayal often features the angels arranged around a table, reinforcing the Trinitarian perspective (Bucur 2015, 261-3; Mihăilă 2017, 118). This ambivalence is also observable in the illuminations of the Byzantine Octateuch. For example, in the scene depicting the three angels around a table, the artist represents the central figure as Christ, featuring a cross in the halo (VAT. gr. 747, folio 39r). Later, there is a diminished focus on depicting Christ in a heavenly nimbus blessing Abraham and Sarah, as seen in another manuscript (VAT. gr. 746, pt. 1, row 73r). However, this later manuscript does not portray the scene with the three angels and the cross in the halo for the central figure (VAT. gr. 746 pt. 1, folio 72v), which could indicate a greater openness to the Trinitarian perspective. In summary, while the Christological perspective appears to dominate the illuminations in the Byzantine Octateuch, the Trinitarian viewpoint does not seem to be entirely overlooked. Paradoxically, the mimetic character of the three angels from the Mamre Oak scene has, over time, supported the reception and establishment of a Trinitarian interpretation in Orthodox Church iconography, mainly influenced by Andrei Rublev's icon after the fifteenth century (Bunge 2007, 52-56; Bucur 2015, 263).

In the Octateuch, the blessings of Abraham and Sarah serve as a pivotal scene, shaping the other Christological narratives that focus on Isaac as the central character. The scene depicting the sacrifice of Isaac is a classical representation (see Fig. 5) and, as we know, dates to the pre-Constantinian period of the Christian Church (Jensen 78-82).



Fig. 4. Abraham and Isaac climbing the mountain (VAT. gr. 747, tab 43r)



Fig. 5. Sacrificing Isaac (VAT. gr. 747, tab 43v)

We are particularly drawn to the scene that precedes the classical one, where Abraham is depicted with his son, separating from his servants to ascend Mount Moriah (Gn 22:5). In VAT gr. 746, part 1, tab 82r, we see Abraham placing the sacrificial wood on Isaac's shoulders. Meanwhile, VAT gr. 747, tab 43r illustrates the moment of their climb up the mountain, with Isaac appearing to kneel under the weight of the wood on his back (Fig. 4). The typological connection between the sacrificial wood and the Holy Cross, as well as the challenging ascent of the mountain and the journey to Golgotha, is evident. Isaac is presented in a typological context that reveals its full significance about

the Holy Passion and Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

Like Abraham, Isaac also receives God's divine blessing (VAT gr. 746, part 1, folio 91v), with Christ appearing in a heavenly aura to bless him during the night, thus reaffirming the promises made to his father (Gn 26:24).



Fig. 6. Isaac receiving the divine blessing
(VAT gr. 746, pt. 1, folio 91v)



Fig. 7. Jacob's ladder
(VAT gr. 747, folio 50r)

The cycle of scenes and illuminations dedicated to Jacob aims to emphasize the Jewish patriarch's role in the divine plan of salvation. It highlights how the fulfillment of divine promises is realized through Jacob and his family. This involvement is not solely due to God's election but also reflects Jacob's "struggle" to receive heavenly blessings. A key moment is Jacob's vision of the divine ladder, where he sees angels ascending and

descending (Gn 28:12-13) and finds Christ Himself at the top (VAT gr. 747, folio 50 r). Similarly, the cycle of scenes and illuminations dedicated to Joseph is equally rich, reflecting the characteristics of the Christian Church after the 4th century (Giannoulis 2017, 205). One notable image within these illuminations is the betrayal of Joseph by his brothers (Gn 37:28). This scene holds deep mimetic significance as it parallels the betrayal of Jesus by His disciples, also referred to as brothers. In the illustration, Joseph is drawn from the well with his arms outstretched, resembling the Holy Cross, and is sold by his brothers to a group of Ishmaelite traders while they sit at the table. This depiction of Joseph being sold suggests a foreshadowing of his eventual crucifixion, like how Christ was betrayed and handed over to the Romans by His companions after the Last Supper.



Fig. 8. Joseph sold by his brothers (VAT gr. 746, pt. 1, folio 116v)

The same mimetic character, with deep typological significance, can be observed in the scene where Moses and his family travel to Egypt at the Lord's command (Ex 4:18-20). Moses is depicted in the act of saying goodbye to his father-in-law, accompanied by his wife, Zipporah, and their two children—Gershon and Eliezer—who are sitting on donkeys, with their mother breastfeeding the youngest (Fig. 9). The resemblance to a New Testament biblical episode in the Gospel of Matthew, which describes the Holy Family's flight into Egypt (Mt 2:13-14), is striking. However, what seems to be anticipated here is not just the moment of departure, but the eventual return to the Holy Land, the Promised Land. Based on the biblical context, we see that Moses's

departure to Egypt occurs “after a long time has passed” since the death of the Egyptian king from whom he fled (Ex 2:23). Similarly, the evangelist Matthew specifies that the return to the “land of Israel” happens after Herod’s death (Mt 2:19-21). Additionally, Zipporah’s act of breastfeeding their child alludes to Mary’s breastfeeding of the holy child upon their return from Egypt, a detail found in the apocryphal Gospels.



Fig. 9. Moses and his family
(VAT. gr. 747, folio 76v)



Fig. 10. Moses with his arms raised
(VAT. gr. 747, folio 94r)

Thus, this depiction suggests that Moses's journey with his family did not end in Egypt but culminated in the "land of Israel," the land promised to the patriarchs of the Israelite people. Through this illumination, Moses's family is assigned a typological significance parallel to that of Jesus Christ's family.

Several well-known scenes that evoke a Christological character include the depiction of Moses on the mountain with outstretched arms, supported by Aaron and Hur, paralleling the image of the Holy Cross. At the same time, Joshua fights against the Amalekites (Ex 17:10-12). This scene serves as a symbol of victory over enemies. Another significant scene is that of the brazen serpent raised in the wilderness (Nm 21:8-9), which, like the Holy Cross, represents the healing of sin.

While these scenes suggest a Christological interpretation, those that involve the messianic prophecies made by the prophet Balaam and Moses himself have a more explicit Christological character. For instance, Balaam, riding a donkey, is halted by an angel (often identified as the Archangel Michael), who confronts him with a raised sword (Nm 22:21-35). In this context, Christ is visually represented within a celestial nimbus (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 175r) (Fig. 11) and is the one who would later be foretold by Balaam (Nm 24:17). Similarly, Moses foresees Christ for his people (Dt 18:15; 18:18), and as in the previous illumination, he is depicted in a heavenly nimbus (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 273v) (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11. Valaam stopped by the angel
(Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 175r)



Fig. 12 Moses prophesying (Vatopedus, Codex 602, folio 273v)

The final illumination in the Book of Ruth, which also serves as a conclusion to the Octateuch, depicts Boaz and Ruth lying on the ground with a vibrant field of vegetation between them (Fig. 13). According to the Japanese scholar Mika Takiguchi, the illustrated cycle of the Book of Ruth could have concluded either with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth or the birth of Obed (Takaguchi 2007, 223). However, the choice to depict Boaz and Ruth in this prone position not only reflects the narrative of the Book of Ruth but also hints at the future events explored in the Books of Kings. Their posture foreshadows Jesse, who is similarly represented in iconography lying on the ground, from whom the family tree of our Lord Jesus Christ is said to emerge (Takaguchi 2007, 225). While it is believed that the iconographic origin of the Tree of Jesse should be traced back to the Christian West, its later representations, particularly during the era of the Palaiologos, do not rule out the possibility that this theme was known in Byzantium much earlier, as suggested by the Octateuch.

What is certain is that the depiction of Boaz and Ruth lying on the ground aims to foreshadow the Davidic lineage, which will culminate in the birth of Christ. This illustration seeks to highlight the royal lineage of Christ, emphasizing the typological relationship with genealogical lines. This is particularly evident in the genealogy presented by the Evangelist Matthew (Mt 1:1-17), as opposed to that in the Gospel of Luke, which traces the descent back to Adam and Eve, the first parents of humanity (Lk 3:23-38). Furthermore, it is worth noting that there is no discernible correspondence

in the illuminations of the Octateuch between the scene of Boaz and Ruth and those depicting Adam and Eve separately, lying on the ground. Thus, the final scene of the Octateuch does not intend to conclude a complete cycle of illustrations related to the book and its various interpretations. Instead, it seeks to preserve and cultivate the “mystery of the search for Christ” that is hidden within the Scriptures.



Fig. 13. Boaz and Ruth (Codex 602, Vatopedus, folio 465r)

Conclusions

The illuminations of the Byzantine Octateuch are notable for their ability to reveal the exegetical tradition of the Church of the East through visual expression. These illuminations primarily serve a didactic and pedagogical purpose. However, they also possess a secondary anagogic dimension. The illuminations complement one another, forming a cohesive whole designed to uncover and affirm the truths of faith. Consequently, they transcend mere didactic or decorative roles, functioning instead as tools for theological interpretation. They offer a visual reading of Scripture that emphasizes the mysterious presence of Christ in the Old Testament texts.

Artists utilized typology as the primary key for visual interpretation, allowing viewers to understand Old Testament events and characters as prefigurations of Christ's saving work. Thus, these illuminations synthesize the biblical narrative to enhance its theological significance, guiding viewers toward a deeper discovery of Scripture's spiritual meaning. They strike a balance between fidelity to the biblical account and theological interpretation, alternating between descriptive scenes and those that highlight Christological presence, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, the hospitality at the oak

of Mamre, and the raising of the bronze serpent—all of which are foundational elements of patristic typology. As a result, these images serve as more than mere illustrations; they act as a visual guide that directs readers to Christ, the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecies.

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