Light in Medieval Manuscripts

Background Notes

Dr Sally Dormer – Wednesday 21 October 2026



Vienna, Ost. Nat. Bib. Cod. 2554, *Bible Moralisée*,
Paris, c. 1220, fol. 1v, Christ as Creator

Light features at the beginning, middle, and end of biblical time. In Genesis, 1:3, God says, ""Let there be light!", and there was light". In Revelation 21:23 John the Evangelist, shares his vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, "the city hath no need of the sun or the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God hath enlightened it and the lamb is the light thereof". In the Gospels Jesus lays a personal claim to light, stating, in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life". Light, without which humans struggle to survive, occupies the very heart of the Christian message.

Light also plays a central role in the world of medieval manuscripts. Post-medieval scholars applied the term "illuminated" to medieval books embellished with golden surfaces that light up as they reflect daylight or candlelight. Today, the adjective is used more generally to describe books with extensive schemes of decoration and/or illustration, with or without gold, but the original meaning is relevant to this seminar, where we will examine how makers of medieval books conjured the idea and actuality of light.

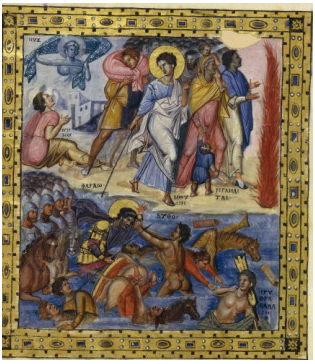
We will first consider the varied ways in which heavenly, or celestial, light was presented to audiences in book illustration, and then explore the sacred settings depicted in manuscripts where earthly light was deployed using devices like candlesticks, candelabra and chandeliers.

Celestial Light

The Creation story in Genesis confirms that God is the source of all light **(1)**. After He had created light and noted that it was good, He divided the light from the darkness, calling the light "day" and the darkness "night" (Genesis 1:4-5). After that he added two great lights, the sun to rule the day and a lesser light, the moon, to rule the night, plus stars set in the firmament of heaven to give light upon the earth. In this context, and in almost *all* contexts, the medieval mind interpreted these lights metaphorically as being synonymous with God's presence and spiritual enlightenment. By contrast darkness symbolised God's absence and man's sinfulness: as St Augustine of Hippo summarised in his *Confessions* XI.2.1. "How far the first gleams of your (God's), light have illumined me and how dense my darkness remains….",



(1) California, Getty Museum, MS 33, Bible, c. 1400-1410, Creation



(2) Paris, Bibl. Nat., MS Pat Gr. 139, *Paris Psalter*, c. 950-70, Constantinople, Crossing the Red Sea

Further sources of light, gifted by God as assurances of guidance, were either depicted literally by illuminators or given ingenious visual form. Having facilitated the Children of Israel's escape from Egypt, God led them by night as a pillar of fire (Exodus 13:21), as shown in the *Paris Psalter* **(2)**. In Psalm 118: 105, the Psalmist rejoices that God's word is a lamp unto his feet and a light unto his path and in the accompanying illustration in the *Utrecht Psalter* an oil lamp is placed beneath the open book **(3)**. In the same manuscript rays of light emanate from the fingertips of God's right hand, the *Dextra Domini,* as Christ, below, brandishes a flaming torch to illustrate "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?" (Psalm 26:1).



(3) Utrecht, Bibliotheek der Rijksuniversiteit MS 32, *Utrecht Psalter*, near Reims, 816-34, Psalm 26

Isaiah, employs metaphors of light in his many prophecies of Christ, the promised Messiah: (9:2) “the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light”; (42:6) “a light to the Gentiles”; (60:1) “Arise, shine, for thy light has come and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.” To make the point, Isaiah is often shown, like the Psalmist, receiving rays of light from the *Dextra Domini*, an image which reinforces God’s intimate connection with the Messiah, the light of the world.

Heavenly light features prominently in manuscript illustrations of the life of Jesus in the New Testament, prompted at times by the text, or sometimes included simply to confirm Jesus’ divinity at significant moments such as His conception and incarnation. At the Annunciation the Holy Spirit, as a dove, swoops towards Mary in a golden haze, and mother and newborn child are bathed in light at the Nativity. Skilled late 15th century illuminators like Jean Bourdichon employed dusty gold highlights to convey subtle distinctions between divine light shining from above and earthly light cast by Joseph’s lantern **(4)**.

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(4) London, V&A, *Hours of Louis XII*, France, c. 1500, Nativity, Jean Bourdichon

Stars, feature as heavenly guides for the shepherds and the Magi when they visit Jesus at his birth, and when, forty days later, He is presented in the Temple in Jerusalem. Simeon declares Him as “a light to lighten the Gentiles” (Luke 2:32). Presentation scenes feature candles, intended as gifts, to evoke this light, which fostered a tradition that evolved into the Feast of Candlemas celebrated annually on 2 February. Rays of light often cascade from heaven at

Jesus' Baptism and the Transfiguration, events where Jesus is identified as God's precious Son. And Jesus based parables, like the one that features Wise and Foolish Virgins around metaphors linked to light.

Unsurprisingly, light plays a central role in illustrations of Jesus' death. The sun and moon feature in Crucifixion scenes from the 6th century confirming His sovereignty over Creation, and from the 9th -13th centuries the scene often references the absence of light. Female personifications of Ecclesia and Synagogue, flank the cross; the latter, who refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah has covered eyes to confirm her spiritual blindness.

Early 15th-century illuminators conjured the dramatic light effects associated with Jesus' death, as narrated in the Gospels. In a book they made for Jean, duc de Berry, the Limbourg brothers painted the Mount of Olives enveloped in darkness, pierced by pinpricks of lantern-light, campfire flames, stars and an aureole of holy light around Christ's head. With equal bravura they conveyed the crepuscular darkness that enveloped Golgotha at the 9th hour (approximately 3.00pm) when the crucified Christ breathed his last and the Temple curtain tore to communicate restored communion between God and man achieved via Christ's death and resurrection to come **(5 & 6)**.





(5 & 6) Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 65, *Très Riches Heures*, 1411-1416, de Limbourg brothers and Jean Colombe, Christ on the Mount of Olives (left) and the Crucifixion (right)

The Gospel accounts of the Resurrection describe the angels guarding Jesus' tomb as dressed in clothes that gleamed like lightning. In books, they are sometimes shown with red faces as well as white robes **(7)**, to suggest the glow of divine illumination, and the resurrected Jesus was often surrounded by a blaze of light to confirm his risen state **(8)**. Further heavenly light blinds Saul, enroute to Damascus, to affirm the divine source of his decision to embrace Christianity and adopt Paul as his new name.



(7) London, V&A, Single leaf from *Eadwine Psalter*, Canterbury, Christ Church Priory, c.1155-60, Resurrection



(8) New York, Pierpoint Morgan, M495, Missal, Tours, c.1500, Resurrection

Earthly Light

Turning to the earthly realm, "material light", whether natural sun or moon light, or artificial candlelight, was necessary in medieval churches: it was understood as being symbolic of "immaterial light", i.e. it signified the living presence of God. This idea was explored in the early medieval text *On the Celestial Hierarchy,* attributed to the Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, read by ecclesiastics like Abbot Suger of St Denis, Paris (d. 1151).

Underpinned by the reality of church interiors, artificial lighting aids of various sorts, necessary to amplify natural light and emphasise the symbolic importance of light in Christian belief, occur as frequent furnishings of sacred

contexts in manuscript illustrations. Baptisms and Eucharists, were lit by candles, carried in procession, or set around, or on, the altar in candlesticks; their flickering flames confirmed the living presence of Christ within the Sacraments **(9)**. Monumental wheel chandeliers, or *corona*, suspended above altars, conveyed the same message and provided light for the priest's recitation of liturgical texts **(10)**.



(9) Hildesheim, Diocesan Museum, Inv. Nr. DS 18, *Bernward Evangeliary*, Hildesheim, 1015-1194



(10) Chantilly, Musée Condé, Jean Fouquet, *Hours of Etienne Chevalier*, late 15th century

At Requiem Masses draped coffins were encircled by candles. During Easter, a Paschal candle was displayed in a substantial, sometimes historiated, Paschal candlestick, reserved specifically for this season, positioned near the pulpit. Substantial, seven-branched cast copper alloy candelabra, imitating Jewish *menorahs,* featured in most major English and Continental cathedrals. Candles, including coiled examples known as trindles, were gifted by pilgrims to saints' shrines, sites that typically blazed with a myriad of oil lamps and candles present to proclaim the sanctity of the site **(11)**.



(11) Cam. Univ. Lib. MS Ee.3.59, *Estoire de Sainte Edward*, c. 1230, shrine of St Edward the Confessor with coiled trindles

Further Reading:

C.N. Duckworth and A.S. Sassin, Colour and Light in Ancient and Medieval Art (Routledge, 2017)

T. Nickson, "Light, Canterbury and the Cult of St Thomas", *Journal of the British Archaeological Association,* 2020, pp. 78-99

E.Panofsky, Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of St-Denis and its Art Treasures, edited, translated and annotated by E. Panofsky (Princeton 1946 and subsequent editions)

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