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The Nativity

Jereme Shaver

In Thielman Kerver's 1507 Book of Hours, the Nativity is located in the Infancy Cycle within the Hours of the Virgin on sig. h7v. Placement of this image in the Hours of the Virgin in the Prime section, which was used during the early morning, included devotion to Psalms 50, 62, and 89, as well as the Nativity scene.¹ This image was printed with a metalcut by the Master of the Trés Petites Heures of Anne de Bretagne, who has been suggested to have been the Parisian artist Jean Dipre.²

The depiction of Mary in this image on her knees derives from the revelation of St. Bridget in the mid-fourteenth century, in which Mary had given birth to baby Jesus while remaining on her knees. Although St. Bridget is not credited for the original visual depiction of this scene in this way, it is believed that after her revelations these images became more common in scenes of the Nativity. Images based on St. Bridget's depiction of the birth of Christ often contain an ox and donkey, Joseph holding a candle, and Christ wrapped in linen.³ Images of the Nativity almost always include the ox and the donkey, which indicate salvation will come to all; the ox represents the chosen Jewish people, and the donkey represents the heathens.⁴

Beside the infant Jesus is Joseph's hat, which is a traditional part of Jewish attire in the Middle Ages. Images that depict Joseph in this attire attribute him as a symbol of the New Testament being unified with the Hebrew Bible.⁵ Prophets are represented on both sides of the

¹ Taft, p. 79 and 98-100.

² Baker, pp. 31-7.

³ Cornell, pp. 7-15.

⁴ Schiller, pp. 60-1.

image, indicating that the prophecies of the birth of Christ have been fulfilled. Behind the tree is a building that may represent the castle of David in Bethlehem, alluding to the lineage of Jesus through the house of David.⁶ The stable in the background represents a ruined church, recalling the *Golden Legend's* account of the collapse of Rome's Temple of Peace. This was often interpreted as the end of classical culture and religion and the beginning of a new era.⁷



⁵ Schiller, p. 73.

⁶ Schiller, p. 67.

⁷ Jacobus, pp. 38-9.

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