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## 13, The Tree of Jesse

Bridget Eide

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*Tree of Jesse*  
Bridget Eide



*The Tree of Jesse, pictured on sig. g4v, and the Annunciation facing it on sig. g5*

The Tree of Jesse was a popular medieval theme used to represent the family tree of Christ. More specifically, it was used to represent Christ's human ancestors, including Jesse, King David, and the Virgin Mary.<sup>1</sup> This Kerver book has the Tree of Jesse page placed towards the front of the book, on sig. g4v, possibly in reference to the association of the image and where it falls on the liturgical calendar, Advent. Advent is considered a season of waiting and

<sup>1</sup> Blumenshine, Gary. 19.

prepares the reader for the welcoming of the Christ child.<sup>2</sup> The use of the Tree of Jesse during this period offered a source of reflection for the reader, so they might pause and be thankful for the birth of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

The structure of the tree growing out of Jesse is a display of his fatherhood to David and offers an image that becomes symbolic of strength, wisdom, and redemption, through the comparison of David's character and that of Christ.<sup>4</sup> In terms of iconography, the Tree of Jesse was considered a visual representation of the passage from the Book of Isaiah: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots: and the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom, and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isaiah 11:1-3).<sup>5</sup>

This Tree of Jesse is a typical rendition of the iconography with Jesse shown laying down across the bottom of the image, establishing him as the foundation of the ancestral tree.<sup>6</sup> Wide roots spread across the belly of Jesse, with the stem rising thickly out of his navel area and branching out into the outer limbs of the tree and filled by Jesus' ancestors. The central stem rises to the top of the tree where Jesus and Mary are shown together in the same space. In this particular image, Jesus is depicted as a child sitting upon Mary's lap. Mary is the only female that is shown in this image and the other ancestors are dispersed throughout the branches in a descending fashion according to their genealogical location.

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<sup>2</sup> Deeley, Mary Katharine. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Deeley, Mary Katharine. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Labriola, Albert C. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Winn, Mary Beth. Sheerin, Daniel. 175. Taylor, Michael D. 144.

<sup>6</sup> Blumenshine, Gary. 19.

In total, 14 of Jesus' ancestors appear in this image. Their names are labeled and included beside them within the space of a ribbon called a phylactery.<sup>7</sup> This communicated to the reader how, although Jesus is of the Divine, he is also human.<sup>8</sup> This version of the image was very popular during the Middle Ages and this Kerver image follows that tradition.<sup>9</sup> In comparison to this image, a less common version omitted the image of Christ and his ancestors, instead, showing only Mary and a surrounding group of doves.<sup>10</sup>

This version of Tree of Jesse is one the most common variations of its imagery and is included in many of Kerver's productions. During this book's time of production (c. 1507), book plates were usually collected by a printer and repeatedly used in subsequent printings of the Books of Hours.<sup>11</sup> Though the specific arrangement of text and imagery varied between the books, the images themselves came from the book producer's same collection of plates.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Taylor, Michael D. 134-135.

<sup>8</sup> Labriola, Albert C. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Blumenshine, Gary. 24.

<sup>10</sup> Labriola, Albert C. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Maddox, Hilary. 32-33.

<sup>12</sup> Maddox, Hilary. 32-33.

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