

Preface*

The Joshua Roll, an illustrated scroll of the Old Testament book of Joshua from the tenth century, is a masterpiece of Byzantine book illumination. For O. M. Dalton, Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities at the British Museum, it is “among the most important manuscripts, now preserved.”¹ It has its place alongside biblical cycles such as Giotto’s Arena Chapel and Michelangelo’s Sistine ceiling in nearly every introductory text on the history of art. With the Roll being the focus of three full-length books and over a dozen substantive articles, as well as figuring prominently in numerous exhibition catalogues, handbooks, and surveys, it might seem that there is little new left to say about this crucial survival from a thousand years past. Surprisingly, what has been written about it over the course of the past century is for the most part wrong. Despite its prominence in the history of Byzantine art, little attention has been paid to the texts which accompany the pictures, leading to the misreading of scenes and obscuring the reasons for the creation of this unique work of art. This study focuses on the primary sources which explain the illuminations of the Roll. There has not been a proper edition of the text which signals the unique readings of the Roll; these shed light on exactly how the pictures were to be viewed. There is as well, for the first time, an accurate translation of the biblical selections into English.

By the tenth century the codex or book format had replaced the scroll in most contexts. The Joshua Roll is a unique survival from Byzantium of a biblical text illuminated in this way. Many have speculated on the causes for its making, but no conclusions have been reached which enjoy broad acceptance. The solution offered here is new and seems well buttressed by visual and documentary evidence. This study proposes to resolve the most pressing issues concerning the Joshua Roll, namely the precise or to be more specific the ‘literal’ meaning of its illuminations and also the reasons behind its making.

* Earlier versions of this study were presented as “The Joshua Roll: Codex Vaticanus Palatinus Graecus 431 Reconsidered,” *Thirty-Second Annual Byzantine Studies Conference, Abstracts of Papers* (St. Louis, Missouri, 10–12 November 2006) 33–34; and “*Ut scriptura, pictura. The Joshua Roll: Drawings of an Imperial Column of Triumph?*” An afternoon of lectures to honour Cyril Mango on his 80th birthday (Ioannou Centre for Classical and Byzantine Studies, Oxford University, 14 April 2008).

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1 Dalton, *Byzantine Art* 447.