



# The Egerton Genesis (British Library Studies in Medieval Culture)

*Mary Coker Joslin, Carolyn J. Watson*

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M.R. James was prompted to characterize the Egerton Genesis as 'the most puzzling, and also, in view of the wonderful qualities of its drawing and colouring, one of the most fascinating' of all manuscripts he had ever seen. Questions of date, iconographical and stylistic character, artist's training, provenance, purpose, and patronage, largely unanswered since James' time, surround this manuscript.

The Egerton Genesis is a pictorial narrative of the biblical Genesis, supplemented by legendary material. It was commissioned in the fourteenth century for the entertainment of a middle-class patron and his friends. From the choice and treatment of texts we learn that this was a patron who relished the drama, who did not require a pretence of scholarship or piety, a patron with a keen eye for human and societal defects and with an earthy sense of humour. A theological dimension is largely lacking from the manuscript, though figural references to the Deity in the visual narrative are always reverential. The book does not glorify kingly figures but rather spoofs the stupidity, lust or veniality of the powerful. The artist points out social conditions of his time, sympathizing with the beggar, with the tithe payer and with the problems of powerless women and ordinary shepherds.

This study provides valuable new insights into a fascinating text.

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