

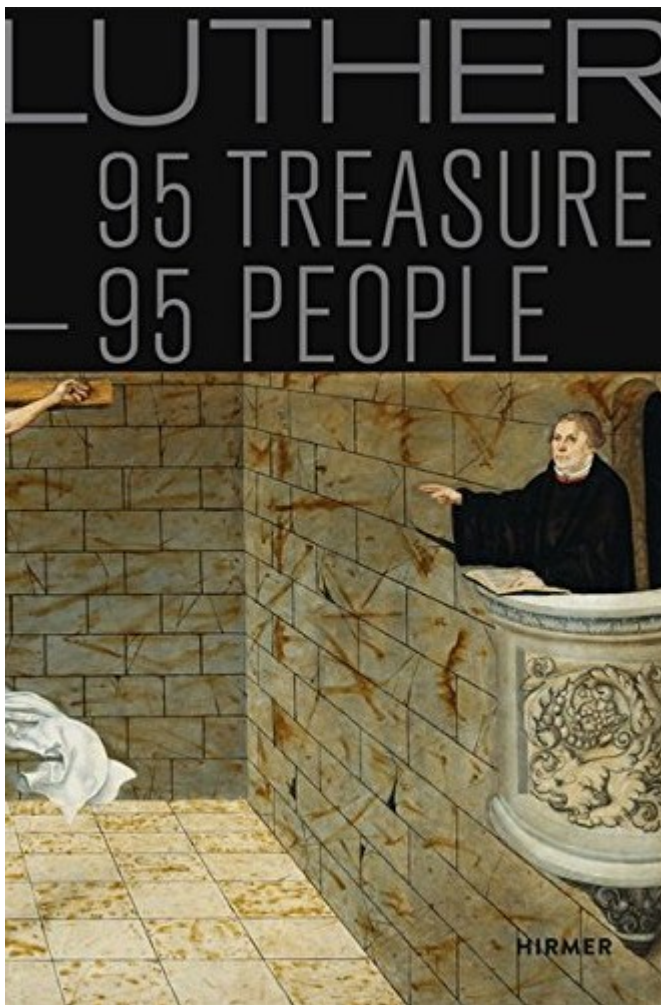
Coffee table treasures

Most books are easy for me to give away. Not beautiful books about biblical manuscripts or Martin Luther's legacy.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

January 11, 2018

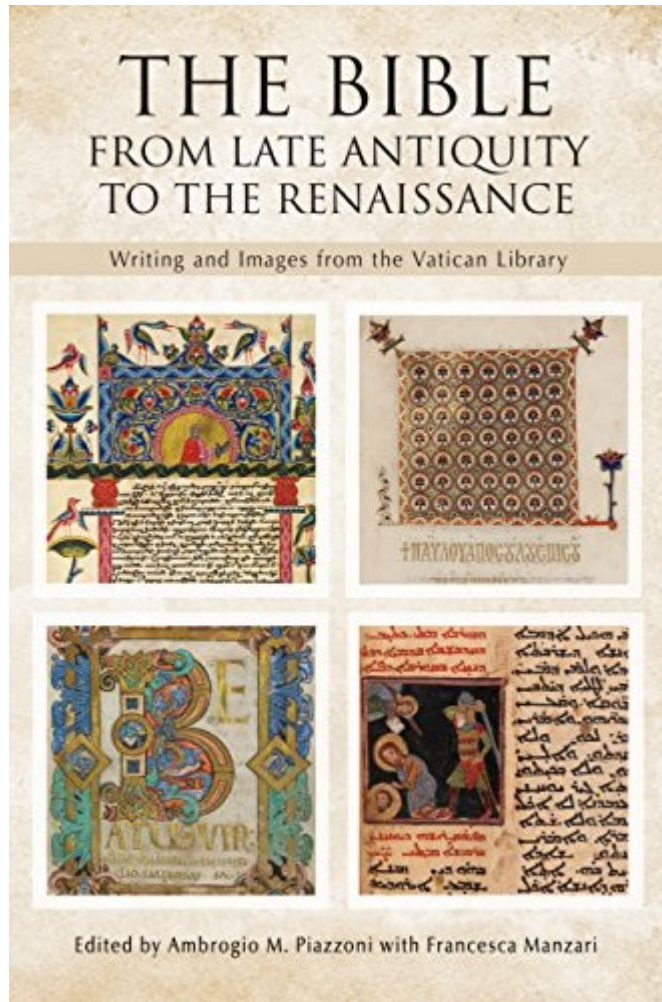
In Review



Luther!

95 Treasures - 95 People

Stiftung Luthergedenkstätten in Sachsen-Anhalt
Hirmer



The Bible from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance

Writing and Images from the Vatican Library

by Ambrogio M. Piazzoni and Francesca Manzari
Liturgical Press Academic

One perk of handling many, many books—and then sending them to other people—is that I rarely get emotionally attached to physical copies of books

anymore. (Confession: I don't even have a hard copy of my own book. After giving away all my free copies, I've been reluctant to shell out the cost of another one to keep on my shelf at home.)

At the office, it's the time of year when I go through the [books I haven't sent out for review](#) and weed them out. Since 2018 has now begun, anything published in 2016 or earlier will be donated to the [Theological Book Network](#). Same for any book we've already covered in CC—whether through an excerpt, a review, or this blog. And ditto for any book (no matter how old) I'm *certain* I won't be sending out for review.

There's almost nothing more satisfying than giving away large quantities of books to a nonprofit organization that helps supply seminary libraries in the majority world. But as I sort through my stacks each January, there are always a few books that I'm tempted to hang on to. This year, two coffee table books are tugging at my heart.

Luther!: 95 Treasures - 95 People documents the National Special Exhibition that ran in Lutherstadt Wittenberg from mid-May to early November of last year. It's not just any museum exhibition book: it's a masterpiece of theological and historical reflection connecting Martin Luther—for good and for ill—with some of today's most urgent questions and those who ask them.

The 95 treasures, from a sundial to an indulgence to a travel spoon to Luther's toilet seat, appear in full-page color photographs. Scholarly essays connect these objects to themes from the Reformer's life: fear, corporeality, liberation, and so on. For example, a picture of animal bones found in the archeological dig at Luther's childhood home in Mansfield accompanies a fascinating discussion of the family's dietary practices—including religious feasting and fasting. "There were three times as many goose bones as bones from other fowl in the family's rubbish pit. . . . It is highly likely that the family bred their own geese." Luther's cowl is pictured next to a discussion of his changing relationship to monasticism during his early years and even following the Diet of Worms.

The 95 people, from Martin Luther King Jr. to Astrid Lindgren to Mary Daly to Steve Jobs, are pictured alongside essays connecting them to themes from the Reformer's life: faith, conscience, labor, and so on. Here, too, the book visually emphasizes material objects. Paul Althaus's harmonium makes an appearance, as does Megan Rohrer's book *Queerly Lutheran*. So do a handwritten cantata by J.S. Bach and the logic board from a computer used to investigate data provided by Edward Snowden.

A doodle drawn by German resistance fighter Sophie Scholl against the Third Reich appears next to a quotation from her writings: “I could weep at the callousness of people, even leading politicians.”

The Bible from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance celebrates the Vatican Apostolic Library’s vast collection of biblical manuscripts, which spans from the second-century Egyptian Hanna Papyrus 1 to Donald Jackson’s seven-volume masterpiece [*The St. John’s Bible*](#). The book’s vivid photographs demonstrate that there was a time in history—a very long span of time, in fact—when not all Bibles looked alike. Colorful original manuscript pages—flaws and all—are replicated with such precision and at such a large scale that leafing through the book feels like taking a tour through a rare books room, where art and text intersect in sacred scripture.

The accompanying scholarly essays illuminate the photos in the context of the history of Christian interpretation of scripture. There’s more detail in these essays than most lay readers will be able to absorb: glosses, diacritical marks, colophons, and chiaroscuros pile up in an encyclopedic whirlwind. This preponderance of detailed analysis reveals how beloved (and sometimes contested) the scriptures and their interpretation have been through history. It also demonstrates that the nuances of 2000 years’ worth of Christian interactions with biblical texts still matter for people of faith today—even as most readers will gravitate toward the pictures rather than the text.

Both of these books will end up with the Theological Book Network . . . eventually. But I want a little more time to savor them before sending them on to their next destination.