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Dunham Bible Museum

“An Original Leaf – Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, 1576”
1,150 words

Justice in the Balance: The Word against the World in *Acts and Monuments*

Justice in the Balance: The Word against the World in *Acts and Monuments*

When the Protestant Church of England was taking shape under the guidance of Queen Elizabeth I, one of the most influential books in modern Christianity was penned. John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, often referred to as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, was first published in 1563 by John Day. Foxe presents an extensive and well documented history of Christian martyrs from the time of Christ until his own time. The book was wildly popular, and a second, expanded edition appeared less than a decade later containing nearly 150 woodcut images. The third edition in 1576 was more compact, making it more affordable for a wider audience, but was no less rich with content and images representing the stories.¹ This 1576 edition contains a woodcut depicting an allegory of "Justice in the Balance." The image differs from many of the other woodcuts in the work, as it provides a succinct yet powerful summation of the theme of the work as a whole: the vanity of the world cannot stand against the Word of God and its true adherents.

In Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* the images are not meant to teach the content of the work to the illiterate as is a common assertion regarding the purpose of medieval and early modern images. Instead these images give life to what has already been taught through the text. The message of the martyrs' stories is centered on the devotion and content of their faith. Yet the images in the work portray the actual events of the martyrdom. If the images were meant to teach the illiterate, the primary focus of the work would be lost. While the images make the text more real and compelling, they cannot stand alone. Instead, they bring life to distant events, adding

¹ John N. King, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Early Modern Print Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006,) 92.

dimension to the already rich text. James Knapp challenges the idea of images as instruction for the unlearned stating that “it is dangerous to assume that the ‘message’ of the illustrations was accessible by virtue of the transparent nature of visual representation.”² Oral instruction was the primary means for the dissemination of knowledge and had to accompany images, which could not convey complex stories or doctrines on their own. Not only could the images be misinterpreted if viewed apart from any knowledge of the text, but the inclusion of woodcuts made the work less accessible to the lower classes who were the most likely to be illiterate. The first edition in 1563 contained fifty-six woodcuts of various sizes. In 1570 a second edition was printed, and despite its popularity, the work was expanded and the number of images nearly tripled, theoretically making less accessible, not more. With the third edition in 1576, in which the “Justice in the Balance” woodcut first appears, Foxe and his publisher did attempt to scale the work down and produce a slightly more economical edition, but they abridged neither the text nor the images.³

While most of Foxe’s woodcuts depict scenes from his accounts of martyrdom, “Justice in the Balance,” appearing on the final page of the 1576 edition’s first volume, summarizes the theme of the entire work in a single image. Justice is personified in the middle of the woodcut as a blindfolded woman who holds scales which judge between truth and falsity.⁴ On her left are monks, bishops, and the pope, who have poured their jewels, decrees, crucifixes, and the elements of the Eucharist into one side of the scales. A demon even hangs from their side of the balance, attempting to tip the scales. Opposed to these, on Justice’s right hand, are a group of

² James A. Knapp, *Illustrating the Past in Early Modern England: The Representation of History in Printed Books*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003,) 128.

³ King, 124.

⁴ John Foxe, “Acts and Monuments: Justice in the Balance,” woodcut, 1576; 09.52, Donald Brake Collection; Dunham Bible Museum, Houston, TX.

humbly clad, barefoot saints who have placed *Verbum Dei* in the balance. The text describing the picture reads: “A liuely picture describyng the weight and substaunce of Gods most blessed word, agaynst the doctrines and vanities of mans traditions.”⁵ Foxe proclaims that the Word of God alone is enough to outweigh all the trappings of a corrupt church.

The 1576 edition of *Acts and Monuments* was the first to include the “Justice in the Balance” image.⁶ The subject of the image differs from most the others in the work as it is an allegory and not a representation of actual events. It concludes the first volume, which contains six books spanning the history of the church from the first century to the beginnings of the Protestant Reformation. This image sums up the concluding chapter of the first volume which deal with “The proud primacie of Popes...risyng vp by little and little, from faythful Bishops and Martyrs, to become Lords and gouernours ouer Kyng and kyngdomes, exalting themselues in the Temple of God.”⁷ Foxe intends to show that the once godly and noble office was corrupted and was thus at odds with the faithful. With one image he shows the trappings and wealth which had replaced the word of God in the hearts of much of the church, most importantly that of the pope. This representation is contrasted with the faithful adherents who are unencumbered by wealth, but value the *Verbum Dei* above all else.

The image also sets the tone for the remainder of the work, in which the tension is not between the faithful and the heathen, but two groups who both claim Christ. In the second volume Foxe describes the persecution of Protestants at the hands of Catholics. Foxe boldly proclaims that truth and justice side with those whose faith rests in Christ and his word alone. In the image Foxe condemns the pope and his followers who have abandoned the Word of God

⁵ Foxe, “Justice in the Balance,” Dunham.

⁶ King, 128.

⁷ John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online or TAMO*, 1576 edition, (HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011,) 780. <http://www.johnfoxe.org>. Accessed: 4 Feb. 2016.

alone as their guide. While the work spans the entirety of Christian history, Foxe presents the tension between Catholics and Protestants as the main focus of the work. The first half of the work covers nearly 1,500 years of history while his second volume covers less than 100.

Foxe's "Justice in the Balance" woodcut bridges the gap between not only his two volumes but between two ages of church history. His first volume records persecution under a united church while the second covers the deaths of Protestant saints under a divided church. Yet Foxe's message remains the same and is artfully depicted through "Justice in the Balance:" throughout the history of the Church, while persecution is ever present, the Word of God will always triumph over any design of man.

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