Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.
Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long.
Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you.
Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.
In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me.
There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours.
All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.
For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.
Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name.
I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever.
For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.
O God, the insolent rise up against me; a band of ruffians seeks my life, and they do not set you before them.
But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
Turn to me and be gracious to me; give your strength to your servant; save the child of your serving girl.
Show me a sign of your favor; so that those who hate me may see it and be put to shame, because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.
— Psalm 86:1–17 (A Prayer of David)
The great King David is kneeling, his hands clasped and head bowed. For more complicated is the attempt to emotionally sit or depict the inner state of prayer in the viewer. The portrayal of scriptural illustrations in books and manuscripts is to visually reinforce or “explain” what is happening in the text. In the best of examples, such illustrations will additionally enhance the text emotionally. Sometimes—they will impart new meaning that has been interpreted from the text, even forming a kind of scriptural commentary.

These kinds of previous images, the highly decorated illustrations in illuminated manuscripts, were meant for the viewer to peer at closely. And surely an image such as this may inspire the viewer to read the words on the page and ultimately to actually offer one’s soul to God.

This initial is historiated, meaning it is a letter that also includes an identifiable figure or scene. The support for this small hand-painted and gilded scene is a veil, specially prepared animal skins (gilt, sheep, or calf), used like paper for writing manuscripts and documents, and also as the support for illuminations and miniatures. Production of vellum and parchment was time consuming and thus restricted in use compared to the later-developed forms of European parchment. Parchment was the predominant writing support in Europe from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries, at which time the printing press and continued growth of paper mills supplanted its widespread use. Vellum was used in certain instances, such as the foundation for the glistening and precious illuminated manuscripts so popular in the medieval period and beginning of the early modern period.

Attributing the artist of medieval manuscripts can be complicated because often many individuals work with the reality of God to discover with the insight of the book or manuscript, and much of the information on such artists is lost. Close examination of individual sheets or pages, and careful comparison work, may yield conclusions. This kind of close work is called connoisseurship and is a critical and exciting realm of art historical scholarship. This cutting is attributed to the Master of the Franciscan Breviary, who was a follower of other known manuscript masters. The Master of the Franciscan Breviary takes this name from a twelfth-century breviary used by Franciscan monks, now in the Biblioteca Universitaria in Bologna. This artist likely began working around 1440, and is also responsible for a monumental Choir Book (now in the Cornell University Library). This collective master presents the Master as one of the significant proponents of a curious, Gothic style in mid-fifteenth century Milanese manuscript culture.4 The highly decorative flourishes and fanciful quality of this illustrated initial are typical of the Master’s work.

Word

His name and exploits are heralded throughout scripture: humble shepherd boy who becomes a giant-slayer, valiant soldier, aide to the king, victorious outlaw, and King of Israel. We’re talking, of course, about David, considered the greatest king in Israel’s history. His bravery and exploits are etched throughout the pages of the Old Testament. His obedience to God is lifted up even in the New Testament, when Luke testifies on behalf of God that “David is a man after my own heart’ (Acts 13-22).

Yet how can that be, given David’s obvious imperfections and indiscretions? As in several of David’s psalms, this contrite king candidly shares flaws and failures. His arrogance is stilling. His excesses are alarming. Recall, he ordered more than 40,000 Ammonites slaughtered in retaliation for their mischievous shaving off half the beards of David’s soldiers (2 Sam. 10). His adultery with Bathsheba and his blood-soaked attempt to cover his tracks (2 Sam. 13) reads like a murder mystery. His actions are, at times, reprehensible. Yet scripture offers ample evidence of how much God loved David and how much God loved David. Truly, he was a man after God’s own heart. And from his earliest days as a shepherd boy and through every chapter of his extraordinary life, David remained devoted to God in prayer.

David is perhaps best known today as the author of almost half the 150 psalms included in the Bible. Psalms are essentially prayer petitions. Theologian and Pastor Tim Keller, in Aids to Prayer, notes that “because psalms were not simply read, but sung, they penetrated the minds and imaginations of the people as only music can do. They so saturated the heart and imagination of the average person that when Jesus entered Jerusalem it was not surprising that the crowd spontaneously greeted Him by reciting a line from a Psalm: Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord” (Mark 11:9; Psalm 118:26).5

David begins Psalm 86 by sitting quietly before the Lord. Reverently, he reveals his very soul to God. He begins in brokenness and humility, remembering that he is a servant of the Most High. He acknowledges God’s greatness and singularity. David then becomes a mediator for his people, remembering how God redeemed them and the responsibility God has placed on him and on them. He asks the Lord to remember God’s covenant—all with the intent of glorifying God. David dose the prayer with profound respect for who God is and God’s profound trustworthiness and asks for God’s blessing.

While Jesus taught his disciples how to pray (Matt. 6), David instructs and inspires us in why and what to pray. “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise…The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:15, 17).

Reflection

As a parish priest, Eugene Peterson observed the difficulty of teaching people to pray: “Faced with the prospect of conversation with a holy God who speaks worlds into being, it is not surprising that we have trouble. We feel awkward and out of place: ‘I’m not good enough for this. I’ll wait until I clean up my act and prove that I am a decent person.’4 Unfortuned, we tend to think that this is what good people do when they are doing their best.”

The reverential posture represented in this illuminated manuscript is not to suggest someone piously managing information before God. Instead, as evident in this miniaturized self, extended to the heavens, David is revealing his entire soul to God—all of it: the good, the bad, the ugly. David’s prayers are honest, organic, and palpably real. He didn’t view prayer as a hobby or last resort. It was his first recourse in difficult situations and his chorus of praise in times of thanksgiving.

Theologians from Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430) to Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–64) all reflect deeply on the Psalms in scriptural commentary. Saint. Augustine described the Psalms as “the epitome of the whole Scripture;” Martin Luther said, “They are a rich book for all saints;” John Calvin referred to the Psalms as “the anatomy of all parts of the soul.” We get an intimate glimpse of David’s soul in his prayers as well as God’s responses in the Old Testament. If it is true that no scripture is sweeter in any language than to hear God speak our name, then it is equally true that God delights in hearing us speak God’s name as well. We have the profound privilege of calling upon God anywhere and anytime in our prayers. It is our opportunity to get real with God, to breathe in and out in the spirit of trust and peace that is the core of prayer. No need for fancy poetry. Keep it simple. Keep it real.

In her book by the same title, Anne Lamott suggests all of her prayers are variations on Help, Thank, Want6 Start there. God is gracious and true. God is expecting to hear from you.


1. Patristics are types of books used in the asceticism of the Christian Church, or during religious practices particular to that period, which included fasting, observing the three office, of daily devotions practiced by saints and monks.


Now a man from the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. 2 The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw that he was a fine baby, she hid him three months. 3 When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river. 4 His sister stood at a distance, to see what would happen to him.

5 The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe at the river, while her attendants walked beside the river. She saw the basket among the reeds and sent her maid to bring it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the child. He was crying, and she took pity on him. "This must be one of the Hebrews' children," she said. 7 Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?" 8 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. 9 Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, and she took him as her son. She named him Moses, "because," she said, "I drew him out of the water."

— Exodus 2:1–10
Pharaoh’s daughter’s handmaiden reaches out to grasp the basket by the blanket that the artist imagines Moses’s mother has wrapped him in, her arms ready to embrace the baby. Although Pharaoh’s daughter isn’t his immediate rescuer, Moses’s plump outstretched arm reaches up toward her, visually signaling the eventual connection between him and his surrogate family in Pharaoh’s house. Large rocks, bending reeds, and the women’s arms frame Moses, harmoniously creating a circular composition to feature the child.

When we think of Moses, what image do we envision? Mighty, powerful prophet with flowing hair and beard? Patriarch bearing the stone tablets, or leading his people across the Red Sea? We adorn him visually but he is threatened infancy. The book of Exodus pulses with energy and foundational basis for Christian and Jewish tradition and belief; it shapes Western history’s spiritual identity. Imagine if Moses the infant had not been hidden and protected by his distraught mother from the Pharaoh’s command to kill all male Jewish babies, or not been generously rescued from his floating papyrus basket by Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses’s mother, knowing she could no longer hide a baby, sent him down the Nile River, in hopes that he would float to the Pharaoh’s palace and be rescued. And although Moses’s sister Miriam watched nearby as he floated in the river, the generous impulse of Pharaoh’s daughter is intensely powerful in light of the potential peril that he would float to the Pharaoh’s palace and be rescued. Pharaoh’s daughter. Moses’s mother, knowing she could no longer hide a baby, sent him down the Nile River, in hopes that he would float to the Pharaoh’s palace and be rescued. And although Moses’s sister Miriam watched nearby as he floated in the river, the generous impulse of Pharaoh’s daughter is intensely powerful in light of the potential peril for the baby. Any parent can conjure the dreadfully idea of circumstances necessitating such a dramatic act, and feel utter relief at the notion of the child being safe and well. Happily, as the story continues, Miriam (who is likely the small girl looking knowingly at the right of the etching) approaches Pharaoh’s daughter offering to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the found infant. Of course Moses’s actual mother is the woman suggested to care for the baby until he is weaned and sent to be raised by Pharaoh’s daughter as her own son in the Egyptian court.

Bartolomeo Biscaino, the artist of this lyrical, tender etching, seems to have been deeply exploring these very ideas. Biscaino, who died tragically at the age of twenty-eight of a plague, revisited this particular moment in Moses’s story repeatedly. He created a number of drawings, prints, and at least one large painting of this subject. Biscaino lived and worked in Genoa, Italy; he was strongly influenced by Italian Mannerism and the work of innovative, influential Genoese artist Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione (c. 1609–1664). Exaggerated and elongated forms are typical in Mannerist works of art; here, the long, gesturing arms indicate central aspects of the episode. The artist puts this stylistic component to work symbolically. Pharaoh’s daughter points to the baby who will become her adopted child and he reaches for her as well, and the handmaiden’s extension toward him, on command to rescue, meet Biscaino’s delicacy of line and refined sweetness is typical of the artist’s style, and lends itself beautifully to this poignant moment.

A child saved out of the Nile River reeds becomes a savior of the Israelites, one who will ultimately lead God’s people to the gates of the Promised Land.

From the incubator of Pharaoh’s court emerges Moses, a leader whose thumbprint is all over the Exodus and ultimately a new nation of God’s people. Only a generous and faithful God would—or could—execute a plotline like this, ensuring that a promise made long ago was kept. Hearing the cries of God’s captive people and remembering the covenant made with Abraham (Exodus 2:24), God raises up the most unlikely of leaders with the most unconventional of backgrounds to free God’s people.

A child saved out of the Nile River reeds becomes a savior of the Israelites, one who will ultimately lead God’s people to the gates of the Promised Land.

And, once again, the story begins with a baby.

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He answered, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live."

But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.' Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

Inspiring Generosity


2. It is important to understand that many such endeavors attempting to depict a world outside of their own cultural context, despite any well-intended incorporation on the part of the artist.


4. Exoticism captured the minds of many Westerners, most famously in the nineteenth century. The concept is defined as a reaction to the dominant colonial and cultural phenomena. The fascination and influence of non-Western arts and culture on European artists was first stimulated by traveling the East in the earliest modern period. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, technological advancements in the developing modern world enabled trade and more travel, and availability, and prestige of non-European objects increased for artists and collectible societies, in particular. Exoticism became more popular and is an inherent part of European design.

5. European typically named such objects, ships, and culture as fictional, spoken, and in a non-primitive. Publications, travel guides, architectural exhibitions, and collections of objects from these lands of all kinds encourage organizations and exotica to reproduce such places. European artists sometimes incorporated specific objects into their compositions (such as the ship and scene to Bresdin’s image), but were more inspired by stories, stories, and designs, and by extension even materials and techniques to simulate such designs.


8. Saul Bellow's magnificent, Noggin's of the World, the 40th anniversary edition. The rest is not for our purposes.

9. It's the timeless quality of Christ’s parables, where truths echo through two thousand years to land on our eyes and our ears today.

Bresdin's lifetime popularized exoticism. The notion and sight of what appeared exotic to Europeans sprang to life in art, literature, and visual culture. The camel, along with a long spear and decorated shield (hidden just behind the grass near the wounded man), and the figures’ dress, reflect the aspirations on the part of many European artists to render more accurate, authentic African cultural interpretations. Such displays of exoticism were popular among the intellectual and artistic circles of the time, often with complex political and social undertones.

Within this luxurious profusion of plants and creatures, the decorated weapons are put away, perhaps to emphasize the brotherhood of these typically at odds people. Composition is at the forefront. The title of this print was Abid el-Kader Aiding a Christian, a recognition of our common human humanity, which, along with Bresdin's decision to draw the animal in this story as a camel, tells us something about the artist's intentions and personal views.

A multitude of influences are apparent in this richly constructed work, perhaps the best known by the artist described as a solitary and eccentric visionary, who was inspired by the literary work of Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo and artists such as Hieronymus Bosch, Albrecht Dürer, and Rembrandt. Bresdin experienced financial and physical hardships throughout his life. Largely self-taught, he lived a bohemian lifestyle around France, and was associated with several artistic and literary circles. Rodolphe Bresdin wasn't well understood in his time, nor his works much recognized, despite receiving some critical praise and commissions. However, this remarkable large lithograph did provide income for the artist and his family and during his life.

The density of detail that Bresdin achieves in this print is astonishing. Better suited to an essay with etching or engraving, this composition is unusual for the medium of lithography. This masterpiece of lithography remains desirable for collectors today as it was in the artist's lifetime.

The Good Samaritan

An entering church advertises itself as “A safe place to hear a dangerous message.” A local Christian radio station has a marketing tagline: “Safe for the family.” It’s a comforting sound for addicts believe to stockpile food for the coming assault on the electric grid, buy gold to hedge against the certain stock market crash, and protect their computer from inevitable identity theft. It is fear of the unknown, fear of the future, the stranger that drives us? Scanning local and world news morning and evening, you run the risk of bookbidding your day with despair. Most news is bad news. The media engines of our world are fueled by fear.

There is a shadowy beauty to Rolpholpe Bresdin’s lithograph Le Bon Samaritain. A compassionate Samaritan ministering to a fallen Jewish man is the illuminated focal point of this piece and of Jesus’s well-known story in answer to the question, “Who is my neighbor?” But that image occupies a relatively small part of this large print. At first glance, there is a foreboding and overwhelming darkness that surrounds the wounded man and his kindhearted helper. It looks terrifying.

Look closer.

What begins to emerge from the shadows is a profusion of plant, bird, and animal life. It is almost as if the trees themselves are stretching their gnarled branches to embrace the injured person. In spite of how it may often seem, and sometimes against all odds, God’s creation bends toward beauty and goodness.

The message of the Bible is God identifying with those who are hurting, no matter their ethnic origin or beliefs. Rather than advise compassion from the safety of a celestial sanctuary, God sent Jesus to practice and teach compassion for those who lie us, those who are like us and even those who are not.

As long as we are resident in this world we are wise to be wary of the stranger and to love our way into a new world where we no longer regard one another from a human point of view. Barely visible in the distance in Bresdin’s lithograph is the city of London. Like Abraham, we too look forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).

In the meantime, we are called to follow our Lord beyond our fears in service to our neighbor. Remember, according to Jesus, a neighbor is anyone to whom we can be a neighbor. An act of obedience, love, and courage. It’s an act of generosity.