

Ethiopian Psalter: The Illuminated Manuscript and Genuine Devotion
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Honorable Mention, Dunham Bible Museum

The way a people describes and preserves an object can reveal a sense of how that people viewed the object. If an object is preserved in many instances, it can be inferred that it was important enough to be preserved. On the other hand, the way in which a thing is preserved reveals how the object is to be used. For example, a wedding invitation's textured paper and delicate calligraphy indicates a particular reverence for the event. On the other hand, an invitation to a toddler's birthday party would employ a heavy laminated card stock with block letters and bright colors.

This perspective on the way objects are made and preserved can give us greater understanding of textual artifacts, particularly Biblical manuscripts. The Bible, as a document that has remained through nearly two full millennia continuing as one of the most widely read texts in history, certainly has changed the way man perceives the world. However, man's perceptions of the world have often influenced the way he perceives the Bible. The way communities have preserved the texts of the Scriptures has not gone unstudied, not without cause. The Nag Hammadi libraries serve as a perfect example of the extent to which modern scholarship sees fit to study the textual artifacts as well the texts contained within them. In many cases, the way a text is made and preserved can reveal a useful image of the life of the community that produced it.

In the Dunham Bible Museum, above a sprawling scroll of Esther, sits an Ethiopian Psalter, or liturgical book of the Psalms of David. A close inspection of the text reveals pages made of velum, animal skin, and a hard wood cover wrapped in a coarse fur. Its slightly uneven lines were clearly taken down by hand and have within them markings used, as in contemporary

psalters, to divide the parallelisms to help in chanting or singing the text. On the right is the text of Psalm 51, a penitential psalm of David used often in the East and West during Lenten services. Facing this famous psalm is an icon of the crucifixion of Christ; the blessed virgin Mary and John the beloved disciple attend on Christ and look on with horror and veneration. The style of icon is distinctly Ethiopian, not at all resembling the Western Medieval placidness, Renaissance realism, or distinctive Eastern decadence. Rather, the faces of all are long and drawn, with wrinkles etched into their grey faces. There are no centurions or Pharisees or crowd of mockers to distract the eye. The viewer is faced with Jesus and the two people who were closest to Him in His earthly life, His mother and His friend.

One quickly jumps to the question of why the crucifixion is represented next to a psalm of penitence from the Old Testament. A more modern edition of the Bible might depict a sacrifice in the temple, or a picture of David in his kingly regalia kneeling, or either of these things with minute labels and detailed explanations of each aspect of the picture. This illuminator¹ has chosen rather to depict a far off event that seems to have little if any relation to the circumstances of the text itself. The illuminator concerns himself not so much with information about the psalm or accurate depiction of the crucifixion in something like the Gospels. Rather, he concerns himself with the state of the worshiper. When reading the psalm of penitence, what greater spur to repentance can there be than the image of the crucified Lord? Mary and John invite the observer to follow their examples and look on Christ. Horror of the crucifixion is a comfort to the Christian who approaches with repentance. As the reader prays that God “Take not thy holy spirit from me” he remembers Christ’s words from the cross “my god my god why hadst thou forsaken me!” The picture in this sense is truly an icon, a window to heaven, rather than a source of information or knowledge. The image of the crucifixion adds no

¹ What I will call the writer of the icon.

new information to the mind of the worshiper; he who approaches without knowledge will only be puzzled by the mystery contained in the juxtaposition of the image and the psalm.

In returning to the original issue of what the psalter reveals about the community or illuminator that produced it, it is helpful to contrast it with more contemporary editions of the Bible. The industry of Bible making is no small endeavor. If one wishes to buy a Bible, he is confronted with a host of translations and editions ranging from study Bibles to literary Bibles to profession specific Bibles. Each manufactured to precise standards in set types with stylized covers designed to appeal to individual markets. These Bibles are filled with notes and glosses cross-referencing other passages of Scripture and explaining the passages in ways the demographic to which it is marketed would approve. Often there will be appendices of topical information regarding various historical information that the editors find relevant to the type of Bible they have made.

While these characteristics of the newer ways of printing Bibles may not be wrong in themselves, they do reveal an important diversion from previous traditions of biblical preservation. Another Bible in the museum nestled among the copies of Renaissance era Bibles by Luther and Erasmus is a Bible with Koberger's commentary in it. This is the first Bible to have been printed with commentary; there are other copies of the Scriptures with scribal glosses, but Koberger's is the first critical apparatus to be printed alongside the text during its production. This shift, along with the monumental change that occurred as a result of the printing press, altered the way the Bible was made and perceived. No longer were there made large editions of vellum tomes with flourishing script labored over by hand for years by a single scribe. Illuminations and icons within the text slowly dwindled and were ultimately replaced by critical

apparatuses. While examining and providing commentary for the Bible should be applauded for its intellectual goals, it should be looked upon with suspicion.

Critical apparatuses in Bibles imply the importance of the historical knowledge gained from the texts themselves and not the faith, hope, and charity one seeks to achieve as a result of reading the texts themselves. This is an essentially gnostic view of the Scripture that asserts the importance of knowledge over faith. The Ethiopian psalter makes no pretensions to granting the reader knowledge; in fact it presumes a basic historical knowledge of the gospel in order for its goal to be achieved. Rather, the psalter serves as a prod to true piety rooted in a genuine experience with the text instead of mere historical knowledge.

This more experiential view of printing the Bible is not without its modern inheritors. The contemporary publishers of the Orthodox Study Bible continue to make Bibles filled with icons, and often new editions of coffee table illuminated Bibles are produced each year. But these are often watered down editions that appeal to a limited audience. A true revival of the illuminated manuscript, perhaps encouraged by the New Monasticism, could bring new life to the contemporary understanding of Scripture and allow for a more genuine meditative practice in the church.