Medieval Prayer: Studying a French Book of Hours
By Emma Perry

Today, people get their Scripture through daily Bible verses from Bible Gateway or a Bible reading plan on their digital device. A handwritten compilation of prayers seems foreign in a world of technology and electronic Bibles. Scrolling one's phone for Scriptures lacks the intention and care that reading handwritten portions of the Bible, like a medieval book of hours, can provide. In the Dunham Bible Museum, there is a book of hours dating to fifteenth century France, possibly around 1460 (Hellstern). Its leaves are made of a thin vellum, and the handwritten lettering is painstakingly neat and uniform. Each page measures about 3 ½ by 5 ¼ inches, and, despite the small size, the manuscript holds finely detailed images, called miniatures, that depict scenes from Scripture. In its display case, the book of hours lies open to a miniature of King David, clothed in royal garb and kneeling at an altar before God's presence. A lyre rests at David's feet, for he expressed his devotion and prayer to God through song and verse in the Psalms. Below the image of David, the Latin text of Psalm 6 begins: "Domine ne in furore tuo arguas me."[1] Though simple in design, the images and text are intended to draw the reader into deeper prayer. The fifteenth-century French book of hours stands apart from intricately embellished medieval manuscripts because of its simple arrangement and ornamentation, but it also shows the intention and dedication of medieval laity as they engaged in prayer.

Books of hours developed from devotional readings used by the clergy which the laity expressed interest in using as well in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. During and before the twelfth century, monks and clergy recited the entire Psalter weekly "in a complex arrangement divided into the seven major daily offices of Matins (or 'Vigils', originally recited

[1] My translation: "Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger."

in the night), Lauds...Prime, Terce, Sext and Nones, Vespers...plus...Compline."[2] The Psalter was accessible to some laity, but only the wealthy and literate. These daily offices are "a set of prayers in eight sections meant to be said at regular intervals throughout the twenty-four-hour day, is called the Hours of the Virgin, and is the basis for the term *book of hours*" (Stein). Eamon Duffy notes how the lay people grew more interested in their own devotional life in the early thirteenth century, perhaps due to the devastating effects of the Black Death, or due to growing prosperity and means of leisure (Duffy, 6). The book of hours represents "the physical embodiment of a remarkable medieval laicization of clerical forms of prayer, the adaptation of the Church's complex liturgy for use by men and women from many walks of life, and of many levels of education" (Duffy, 5). Until the sixteenth century and the advent of the Reformation, the book of hours remained a best seller and the most commonly owned book among laity.

Compared to the intricately detailed books of hours that were often owned by royalty, the French book of hours within the Dunham Bible Museum collection is simple in its decoration. The margins alongside the text are blank rather than covered in detailed designs. The frames surrounding each miniature are painted like wooden columns and highlighted "with gold ink," unlike the ornate borders found in other books of hours. Royalty and nobility often commissioned elaborately decorated devotionals for themselves or a family member, and the resulting book of hours would be seen as a prized possession signifying their wealth and elevated or rising social position" (Reinburg, 3). For a time, only commissioned books of hours were available and thus owned only by highest ranks of society. Gradually, through the fourteenth and into the fifteenth centuries, ownership broadened, and "humbler, less lavishly decorated and less carefully designed manuscripts [became] available to the lesser nobility and the bourgeoisie"

[2] Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and Their Prayers 1240-1570* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 5.

(Reinburg, 21). This French book of hours was probably owned by a lesser nobleman and created for the practical use of daily prayer, unlike the extravagant versions collected by royalty.

Following the usual structure of books of hours, the 1460 manuscript opens with a twelve-month calendar of feasts and anniversaries of saints, written in red and gold lettering. After the calendar, a full-page miniature of John the Apostle on the island of Patmos opens the readings from the four gospels. John wears red and writes on a piece of paper in his lap with a feather pen. An eagle, the symbol that represents John, rests beside the gospel writer and holds a pencase in his mouth. John's image comes first because the gospel readings in books of hours are arranged in "an order dictated by their content," not by their order within the New Testament (Backhouse, 12). After the reading from John, half-page miniatures of Luke, Matthew, then Mark accompany the text from their gospels. Each of the three writers sit within an orderly study or library either reading or writing a manuscript in their laps. An ox sits by Luke's side, an angel by Matthew's, and a diminutive lion by Mark's. Though the half-page miniatures are little more than an inch wide, the images have depth and layer, which is accentuated by the tiled floor receding into the background and the angles of the walls.

After the gospel readings, images from the life of the Virgin Mary accompany the canonical prayers which are at the heart of every book of hours. An angel appears to Mary and announces the birth of Jesus in a full-page miniature that begins the opening words of Matins: "Domine labia mea aperies. Et os meum annunciabit laudem tuam."[3] Golden streams reach down from heaven into Mary's bedroom, indicating the divine presence of God. The annunciation is followed by full-page miniatures of the nativity, the visitation of the Magi, the presentation of Jesus in the temple, and the flight into Egypt. Each image from the life of the Virgin opens a new

[3] My translation: "Lord, you will open my lip. And my mouth will declare your praise."

prayer from the hours. After the final prayer, Compline, the seven penitential psalms are included and begin with the last miniature of the manuscript – a full-page image of David, the primary author of the Psalms. While some books of hours depict David as a young warrior, suited for battle, this manuscript shows David as an old man, kneeling in God's presence. The book of hours ends with the seven penitential psalms, intended to lead the reader through prayers of confession and repentance.

At a time when printed books did not exist and complete copies of Scripture were difficult to acquire, the book of hours provided people access to Scripture outside what they heard on Sundays. Yet even today, books of hours should be cherished because they show devotion to God through image and text. Such manuscripts enriched the prayers lives of the medieval laity, and they can show us how to use God's word to learn how to pray.

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