

A Q&A with Debra Band Author/Artist of

I Will Wake the Dawn: Illuminated Psalms

What is it about the medium of illuminated manuscripts that interests you?

Illumination is a medium in which the artist can literally fuse illustrations and text; when I want the words themselves to, say, bring rushing water to mind as in Psalm 114, I can have the text flowing like a river through a painting. I can highlight particular passages that I want to encourage the reader to concentrate on. Moreover, one doesn't speed-read through an illuminated book – the reader is virtually forced to slow down and contemplate the relationships between the mingled images and words – and thus enjoys an unusually intense relationship with the ideas in the book. It's a very rich and flexible form, with tremendous expressive scope.

What about Psalms drew you to illuminate them?

Psalms bombard the reader with an extraordinary spectrum of emotions and human situations, and the challenge of trying to craft visual interpretations of them was irresistible. These are very subtle poems, and in many of them poet and reader travel a complex psychological and spiritual path. Illuminating them gave me the scope to concentrate on expressing the progress along that path, which posed a profound challenge for the year and a half that I worked on them.

How did you choose the psalms included in the book?

I chose the 36 psalms following long discussions with a number of rabbis and scholars, including my father-in-law, Arnold Band, a renowned scholar of Hebrew literature, who generously contributed the literary analyses found in the book. The anthology illuminated here represent a varied and representative sampling of the emotional and spiritual expressions. I've also recognized these psalms' importance in Christian public and private prayer, and worked with several Christian theologians to identify their places in those traditions.

Given the long history of artistic presentation of the Psalms, what do you feel you add to them with your work?

I've loved medieval Christian psalters since college. Upon beginning this project, it was very surprising to find that there are actually very few Jewish illuminated books of Psalms – as opposed to general *siddurim*, prayer books. Throughout all my work, I consistently seek to introduce the greater body of TANAKH, rabbinics and other literature into the visual interpretation of whatever text I'm dealing with as a way of bringing the whole history of Jewish thought to bear upon it. So far as I have been able to find, there's been remarkably little of this kind of interpretation on Psalms. In addition, because after 2500 years Psalms remain so utterly essential to both Jewish and Christian public and private prayer and ritual, I needed to view them, interpret them in the light of our own contemporary world as well, in the light of modern science, medicine, politics and arts. Finally, although I've sought a broader focus than simply my particular experience, it's certainly colored by daily life in our own time, for instance, the broad politics of our world, raising a family, dealing with illness, and so on. I hope that the reader can relate to these interpretations in a very immediate and lively way.

