

BARRY MOSER'S HATFIELD, MASSACHUSETTS STUDIO IS A BIT LIKE NOAH'S ARK—ENORMOUS dogs amble in twos, caged-birds chirp in urgent dialogue. The high-ceilinged rectangular room, encircled above by a decklike balcony of books, is where Barry Moser has dropped anchor for the past four years, re-envisioning the Bible from Genesis to the Apocalypse. The product of his labor, the Pennyroyal Caxton Bible, is a reckoning of both personal and art historical significance. Based on the King James version, the two-volume holy book is illustrated with 231 of Moser's black-and-white engraved prints. An edition of 400 has been printed, each with hand-set type on archival paper and selling for the lofty price of \$10,000 apiece. Another fifty have been printed as a deluxe edition in five volumes, with handmade paper and specially commissioned bindings. This edition will also include cases of engraving blocks, signed prints, drawings, and photographs documenting Moser's working process. Viking Studio is publishing a \$65 family edition for their fall list.

Since Gustave Doré illustrated the Bible with wood engravings in 1865, twentieth-century artists from Chagall to Dali have contributed to the tradition with illustrations of individual books. But artistic ambition has changed in our super-secular late-millennial age. With the postmodern search for identity frequently confined to the slender temple of the self, Moser's turn to the epic narratives of Judeo-Christian myth seems particularly noteworthy. This prodigious artist's vision has, from the start, swept a wide swath of narrative. A former teenage preacher from Chattanooga, Tennessee, Moser, at fifty-eight, is regarded as one of America's preeminent woodblock artists. He is also a publisher, designer, and typographer, and is renowned for his illustrations of the classics, among them *The Odyssey of Homer*, *Moby Dick*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, awarded the 1983 American Book Award for typographic design. His Pennyroyal Press editions are collected in rare book rooms and special collections at venerable institutions here and abroad, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery, the Library of Congress, the British Library, and the National Library of Australia. He's also illustrated scores of children's books.

Moser's interest in illustrating the Bible goes back more than thirty years. In 1973 he illustrated Marcia Falk's translation of the *Song of Songs* with ink wash drawings, and in 1990, for the reprinted edition, he created a new set of wood engravings. That same year he produced twelve watercolor plates for a Bible published by Doubleday Oxford. It seemed fortuitous when, in 1985, a collector of his work offered to underwrite a major project of Moser's choosing. Bruce Kovner (whose Caxton Corporation was named after British printer William Caxton) was the "angel" at Moser's side a decade later when he began engravings for the Pennyroyal Caxton Bible.

Evident throughout these volumes is the integrity of design so characteristic of Moser's work. The vellum bindings, the weight and texture of the paper, the typography and two-column design, and the intimate visual plates are an eloquent manifestation of devotion and expertise. Working for the first time with a cast polymer resin, known as Resingrave (the cost of scarce boxwood was prohibitive), Moser created images dominated by a striking realism and masterful precision. While several of the prints have a contemporary, nearly photorealist tonal quality, others employ the deeper shadowing reminiscent of traditional woodcuts. Throughout, classical allusions are mixed with modern and personal references. The ancient

# PASSION THE OF BARRY MOSER

BY SARA LONDON

cast is sprinkled with the faces of Moser's friends and acquaintances—Christ (a local chef), Moses (artist Leonard Baskin), Mary (Moser's costume designer), Miriam (illustrator Jane Dyer)—and a modern-day documentary-style diversity prevails. Adam and Eve, wandering along waterfalls amid lush fauna, are as familiar and unglorified as a couple of aging Yuppies exploring a remote outpost in the buff. The Pharaoh, beneath his Egyptian headdress, is thin and vulnerable in old age—a deflated despot. But above a gaunt and bony chest his chin is raised in patriarchal arrogance. Abel, summoning Mantegna's *The Dead Christ*, lies upon a bed of rocks, partially draped by the striped fabric of Holocaust prison wear. And one can't help but see in the young hero David the defiant face of an Intifada-era Palestinian boy preparing to fling a stone. Behind the dark-eyed king-to-be an immense cloud suggests the terrifying power of an unseen Goliath.

Other images dramatize the narrative with a freshly stark and ironic stillness. Moser's Tower of Babel is depicted in silent abandonment; only a corner of the edifice is seen at the edge of a vacant hill rising from a crusty plain. The arid earth is vividly manifest with intricately textured engraving detail that underscores the complexity of the medium. Strikingly dynamic tonal contrasts are employed for the similarly hushed portrait of Jonah. Here, the tormented man's bearded face emerges in dignified contemplation above a quieted sea, while directly behind him a whale's fluke extends like a commanding black cross against a cloudless horizon.

Less typical are fantastical images, a few reminiscent of Blake, as in the starlit heavens in Psalms titled *To Him Who Alone Doeth Great Wonders. The Last Judgment* depicts a repenting man kneeling on a mound of skulls, out of which a tangle of angels and body parts rises toward a visage of Christ in halo-illumination, starry heavens deepening behind. Surreal configurations sometimes underscore themes of violence and wrath, as in a plate in Zechariah in which flames lick upwards from a burning cross toward the floating heads of men gathered hauntingly at the top of the image. As if bound together, the bodiless figures surround the upswept length of a Hebrew prayer tallis. At the polar end of emotion, an image titled *They Laughed Me to Scorn*, in Psalms, stretches the contours of reality as four open-mouthed faces are depicted as morphing out from one another in contorted glee.

Moser himself has hardly caught up with his own sweep of emotions. Just now emerging from a job that could easily have taken a lifetime, he is raw with "separation anxiety." What seems clear to him at this moment is that his life led him "inexorably to this project," and that his distinguished board of advisors, and numerous friends, helped make it all possible. Bible experts Shalom Goldman and Michael Coogan, and poet and biographer Paul Mariani engaged him in "long meditations" as to interpretations of material so memorably idealized in portrayals by his predecessors. Printer Kim Merker of Iowa gave Moser invaluable feedback on matters of typography and design. The full complexity of the task, however, was at times daunting. The "double responsibility" inherent in children's book illustration "taught me how to tell a story with pictures," he says, but illustrating a sacred text presented complications. "I had to be careful not to be offensive with it. But that doesn't mean I'm not provocative," he adds. Portraying Adam and Eve with aging physiques or the Angel of Death as an erotic female whose perky breasts emerge from Medieval armor could, he imagines, upset traditionalists. More anachronistic costume details crop up in a portrayal of archangels Michael and Gabriel on horseback, also in Medieval armor. In another image, Peter is holding a Renaissance-style key. But what Moser justifiably deems radical in his approach is his focus on individuals, rather than the conventional

tableaux of Doré and Rembrandt. "My images are very confrontational. Most of them are solitary figures, because that's where all of us who confront God, or confront the idea of God, that's where that confrontation is, it's when we're alone, we confront God in the solitary hours of the deepest night."

The solitary moment Moser feels distinguishes his images might also describe the artist's own retreat into intensive isolation for the production of hundreds of engravings. "This is highly disciplined stuff," says Moser of the centuries-old process of laying down the tiniest of strokes in an intricate linear vocabulary. Wood engravings were a particularly popular form of illustration in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with metal engraving and etching popularized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, wood engraving had a renewed life. But Moser's late twentieth-century method further distances him from his nineteenth-century colleague Doré. While Moser had no workshop of engraving assistants to whom he could courier his drawings—in earlier times the transfer to woodblock and the cutting were executed by separate individuals—he did have computer technology on his side. Scanning into his computer drawings, newspaper and magazine images, and posed photographs (many taken by his daughter and full-time assistant, Cara), he composed on-screen before finalizing his images for the blocks. Then, for countless hours he labored at his worktable with hand tools—burin, graver, scraper, and burnisher—that indeed go back centuries.

It is with remarkable single-mindedness that Moser circled back, in a sense, to his earliest vocation. "I needed closure in some way with my relationship with God. I started this romance a long, long time ago. This is my song to that. Four years ago I could never have said that." Sitting at his kitchen table, a cup of tea and a two-inch stack of prints from the Caxton Bible before him, Moser

elaborates in a distinct southern accent on how his accomplishment has changed him, just a little bit: "I still do not have any use for preachers, priests, or prelates. I have no use for churches nor catechisms nor dogmas nor doctrines that have been written by men...who insist that their understanding of these things is the only way to understand it, and call themselves God's chosen.... I do find myself now in what I can only call a state of prayer. It has nothing to do with putting my hands together in a prayerful attitude, nothing to do with getting down on my knees; it's just that when I hear and see and read what men (and I use that as a general term) have done, men who, like me, have been flawed, who make no pretense of being paradigms for proper behavior—but when they have raised their puny voices in the praise of something that they know and understand is there and is greater than they are, in that sense, that's what I've become so much aware of...I find that profoundly moving."

Moser is positively religious about great art: "You see it in the bricks and stones of cathedrals, and you see it in the paintings of Chagall, you see it in the sculptures of Michelangelo, Donatello, you see it in the paintings of Rembrandt, and you hear it in the music of Handel. Handel was a goddamned reprobate! And Mozart! But listen to the great Requiem Mass of Mozart. You cannot help but be moved by that!"

With the compassion of a man suited to the pulpit, this former preacher hopes his Pennyroyal Caxton Bible will have something to offer "people who struggle with their daily lives, and have questions, and wonder, and want to believe in something. 'Who are these people?'" Moser hopes they'll ask, "What are they doing? What's this all about?" ■

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**PREVIOUS PAGE:** *Behold the Man* (detail), *The Four Gospels*, John 19:5. **THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT:** *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*, Genesis 2:25. *The Heap of Corpses*, *The Minor Prophets*, Nahum 3:3. *David in the Valley of Elah*, First Samuel 17:49.

