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Biblia Papuperum: The Flight into Egypt with Jacob fleeing Esau and David fleeing Saul

RISD Museum

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I am Emily Peters and I am the Associate Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the RISD Museum. And we are looking at a page from the *Biblia Pauperum*, which is a blockbook produced around 1460 probably in the Netherlands.

A blockbook is a particular kind of printing technique that was very short-lived. There are only a few of them that were made, between about 1460 and 1500. The way it was made is that the text was carved into the same block as the images, so when you see a blockbook page, you have to imagine the block: very intricately carved, a combination of text and image. And imagine that then it was printed by hand onto a large sheet of paper. What you're seeing here is also hand-coloring on top of the brownish-black ink.

So blockbook printing, as you can imagine, was a pretty labor-intensive way to print

Blockbooks throughout their history have been so interesting to collectors that over time they've often been cut apart. What we have here is just a fragment of a total book, and it's very rare to see one of these.

So the page is showing three scenes and a mixture of text and images, and the reader of this book would have seen the scenes and read the images as a way to understanding the religious meaning of the work. The artist has created an architectural framework for the three scenes. The central scene is slightly elevated from the other two, and it is actually not meant to be a continuous scene across all three registers. It is what we call a typological scene, so you have a central scene that refers to two different narratives on either side. The central scene is from the New Testament, and it's the flight into Egypt, when Joseph and Mary took the Christ Child into Egypt to flee from Herod, who had threatened the Christ Child's life. The two side scenes are from the Old Testament, and they pre-figure the life of Christ: each of the scenes on the side is a story of flight or fleeing.

On the left, you have Jacob, who is fleeing from his brother Esau; Jacob is shown in the background with his mother, Rebekah. On the right, you have David, who is fleeing from King Saul; he is shown being lowered down from a tall tower by his wife Michal. And in each case, these flights are flights from misguided power. But they're also showing, in a typological sense, a transition from the old law to the new law, which in this context is the old law of Moses to the new law of Christ. So these are the kinds of connections that viewers would be making across and through the image, with the help of the texts, which also explicitly point out the pre-figurations and the meanings that they had.

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So the reader of a book like this would have used a combination of text and images to understand the story.