

The Newest Illuminated Bible: *Fujimura's The Four Holy Gospels* | BY HEATHER LANGLEY



After nearly twenty centuries, the illuminated Bible has finally gotten a makeover. Thanks to Makoto Fujimura (*above*), the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John have undergone a twenty-first century renaissance in a book commemorating the 400th anniversary of the King James Version Bible, printed by Crossway Publishing (*right*).

Fujimura, a Japanese-American artist with international fame, is recognized for his abstract, free-flowing and often gold-leafed paintings that merge abstract expressionism with the ancient Japanese practice of *Nihonga*, a water-based painting style that is executed with traditional Japanese papers, brushes, and natural hand-made pigments. His multicultural style has made Fujimura's work stand out nationally and internationally, and has earned him widespread recognition as one of the most prominent contemporary artists.

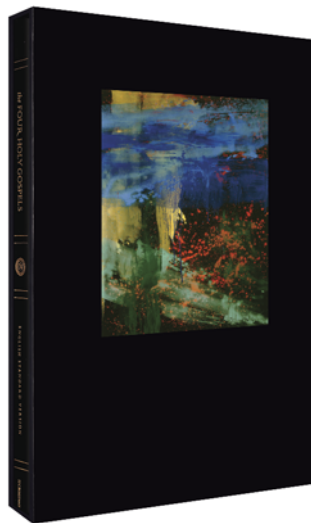
Working out of his Manhattan studio, Fujimura himself

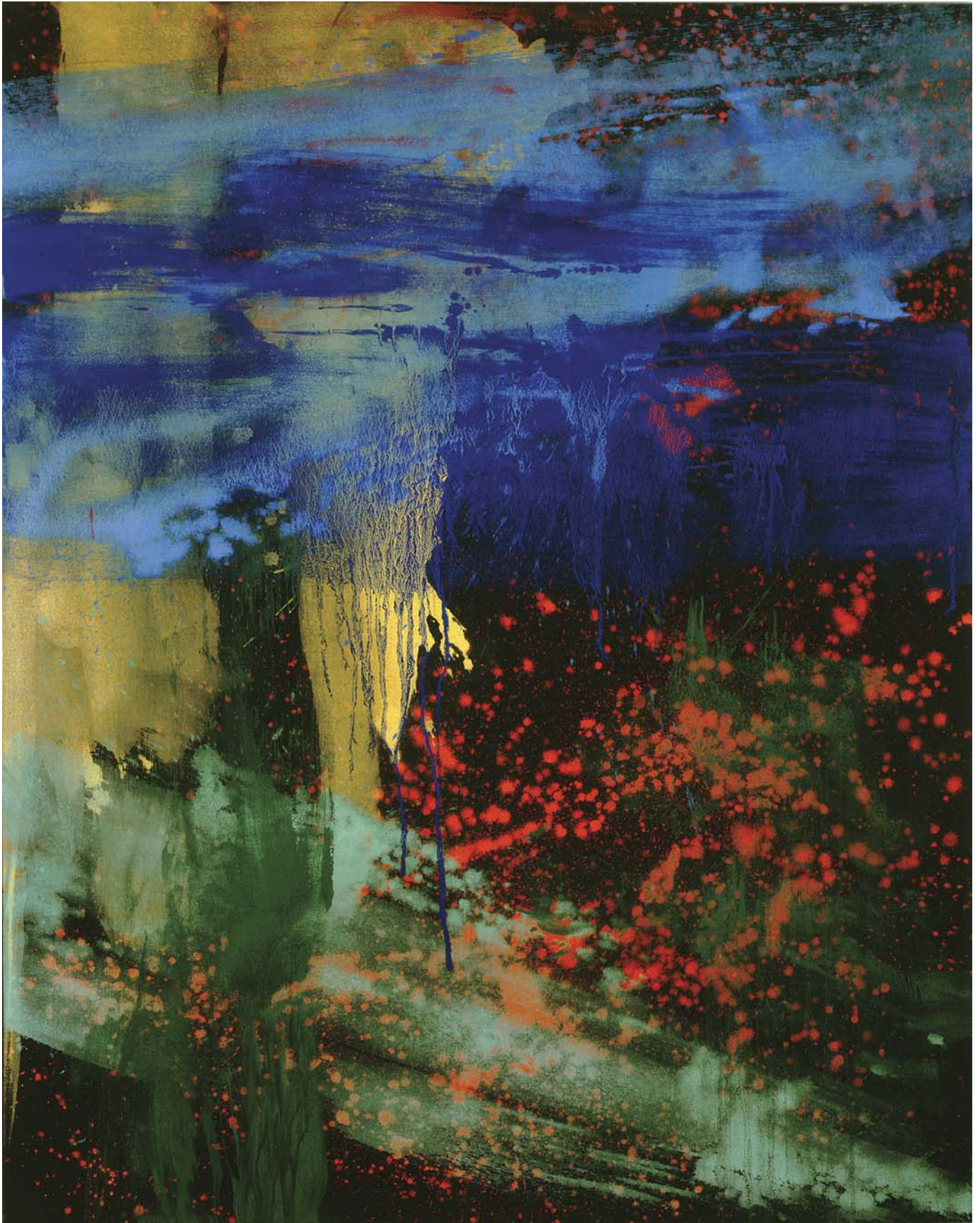
straddles the divide between two seemingly disparate subjects: contemporary art and religion. A devout Christian, Fujimura consistently uses his faith as the inspiration for his artwork, a partnership that is seldom seen within the prominently liberal art circles of New York. He describes himself as "a Christian and an Artist, not a Christian Artist," a statement that is both descriptive of his artwork as well as his audience.

His non-representational paintings are like massive, vibrant watercolors, creating emotional landscapes all their own with wash after wash of blue, black, gold, streaks of green, splatters of red. Fujimura's large canvases require him to work large, too, utilizing squeegee and broom-like tools to apply the paint in broad sweeps. Only after he has laid down the foundation in this way does he come back with a brush no thicker than a few hairs, tediously detailing his compositions.

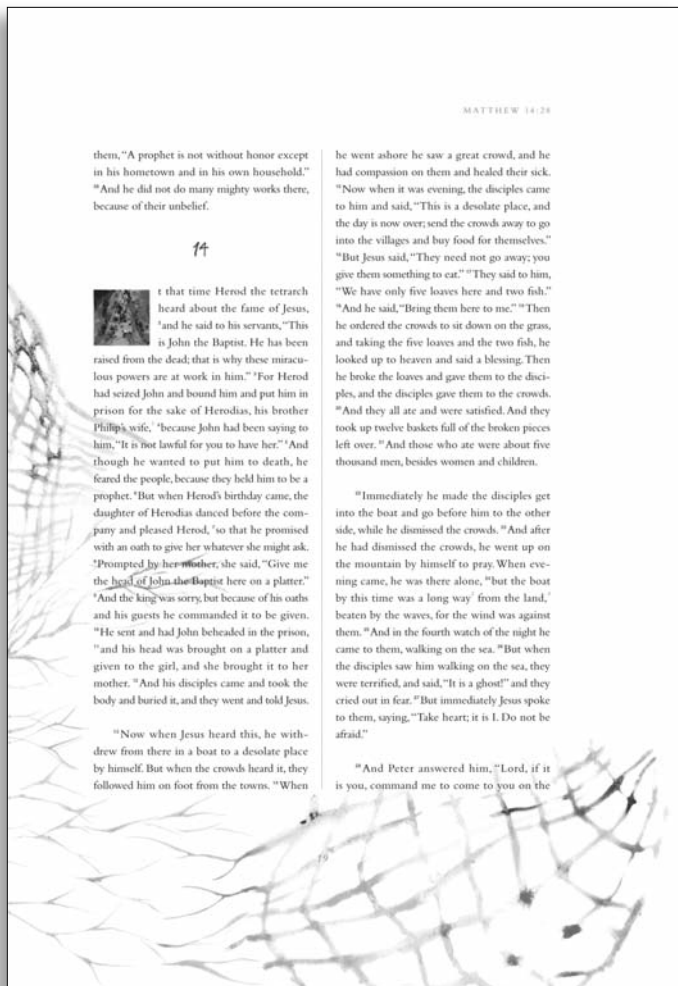
Crossway Publishing's decision to commission Fujimura for their commemorative *The Four Holy Gospels* was therefore an unusual, albeit ingenious, choice. The abstract, transcendental qualities of Fujimura's art present a break from the tra-

ditional and concrete religious themes found in most Bibles to date, from the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages to contemporary children's illustrated Bibles. Fujimura recently said in an interview with the vice president of Crossway's editorial staff that biblical illumination of this kind "hasn't been done for a whole of 20 centuries. We've ignored this relationship between biblical text and





Charis-Kairos (The Tears of Christ) 80 x 64", mineral pigments, gold on Belgium linen



Matthew 14:1-28, an illuminated page of
The Four Holy Gospels

images, so this [project] was a brand new effort." To Fujimura, "biblical illumination opens up the text... it's a catalyst to work so that you can go through the text into what I call a generative reality."

With Fujimura in complete control of the book's frontispieces, illustrations, and overall design, an entirely new kind of bible has arrived on the scene—one that befits both a coffee table and a gallery wall. Published in January 2011, the book has already been exhibited at Wheaton College in Illinois and Addington Gallery in Chicago, with a scheduled exhibition at New York's Museum of Biblical Art in September.

For the creation of *The Four Holy Gospels*, Fujimura spent over a year and a half composing five paintings (one for each gospel plus the cover), adding embellishments, illuminating letters, and designing the book's layout. Harkening to his Japanese roots, the book has a prominently Zen-like feel, with plenty of open white space, crisp edges, and strik-

ing use of shape and color. Each Gospel is assigned to its own painting and contains small stroke-like illustrations on each of its pages. John Wilson, editor of *Christianity Today's Books and Culture*, said in a recent interview that Fujimura's work gives readers "a sense of God and the gospel... and His prodigal generosity" as well as "a sense of God's splendor and the splendor of his creation." The book isn't just a Bible; it is art at its finest, the printed word at its best.

As an evangelical Christian, there couldn't have been a more appropriate project commission for Fujimura. Not many other contemporary artists could have internalized each gospel—its individual content, subject matter, and emotional overtones—and communicated his resulting interpretations with such beauty, originality and grace. The frontispiece for the first Gospel of Matthew, *Consider the Lilies*, is perhaps Fujimura's most representational work of the series, depicting a whitish rendering of Easter lilies on a subtle, light-blue background. The Gospel of Mark's *Water Flames* stands in stark contrast to *Matthew* with vibrant, fire-like hues of red and orange. Luke's *Prodigal God* and John's *In The Beginning* both incorporate multicolored themes and are visually more active with the use of

Luke - Prodigal God 48 x 60",
mineral pigments, gold, platinum on Kumobada





Fujimura creates water-based pigments in practicing **Nihonga**, an ancient Japanese painting style

contrasting textures and patterns. And the book's cover image, *Charis Kairos (The Tears of Christ)*, harkens back to Genesis with complementary themes of light and darkness, green and red, motion and stillness.

Behind the beauty of the artwork lies an interesting phenomenon. Fujimura has, through the abstraction of his art, succeeded in visually transcending the linear language of the Gospels while still presenting a sense of their ultimate meaning. Instead of illustrating the Gospels for the reader, Fujimura accompanies them. He suggests, rather than tells. He expresses, rather than demonstrates. Through his work, Fujimura has freed the Gospels from years of verbal confinement and allowed them the opportunity to speak on their own. Finally, we're allowed to read the Gospels and not only appreciate but revel in their ability to transcend the literal realm and take us to an understanding beyond words.

What Fujimura has created in *The Four Holy Gospels* is something of a biblical revolution, not to mention an artistic one. He's taken the old, tired, yet altogether safe formula of illustrative biblical art and has transformed it into something more complex, more open-

ended, and more applicable to our twenty-first century sensibilities. In our multicultural and pluralistic society, we're becoming increasingly conscious of the need to allow room for multiple interpretations. Fujimura's art reminds us that reading the Bible is not about the henpecking of particular words and phrases, but about the beauty and power of the overarching concepts they represent. Much like the illiterate laypeople of the Middle Ages who needed those concrete visual narratives to understand the biblical passages, so do modern-day readers need the encouragement to understand their own involvement with the words on the page, to interpret the Gospels as text *and* as art. In *The Gospels*, Fujimura has paved the way for a new era of biblical usefulness and poignancy that matches the intellectual growth—and maturity—of its readers. ■

Heather Langley is the editorial assistant at *Spectrum Magazine*.

To watch a brief video about Fujimura's *The Four Holy Gospels* project, please visit *Spectrum's* blog at <<http://spectrummagazine.org/blog/2011/02/12/four-holy-gospels>>.