

Minimalist Gospel Art

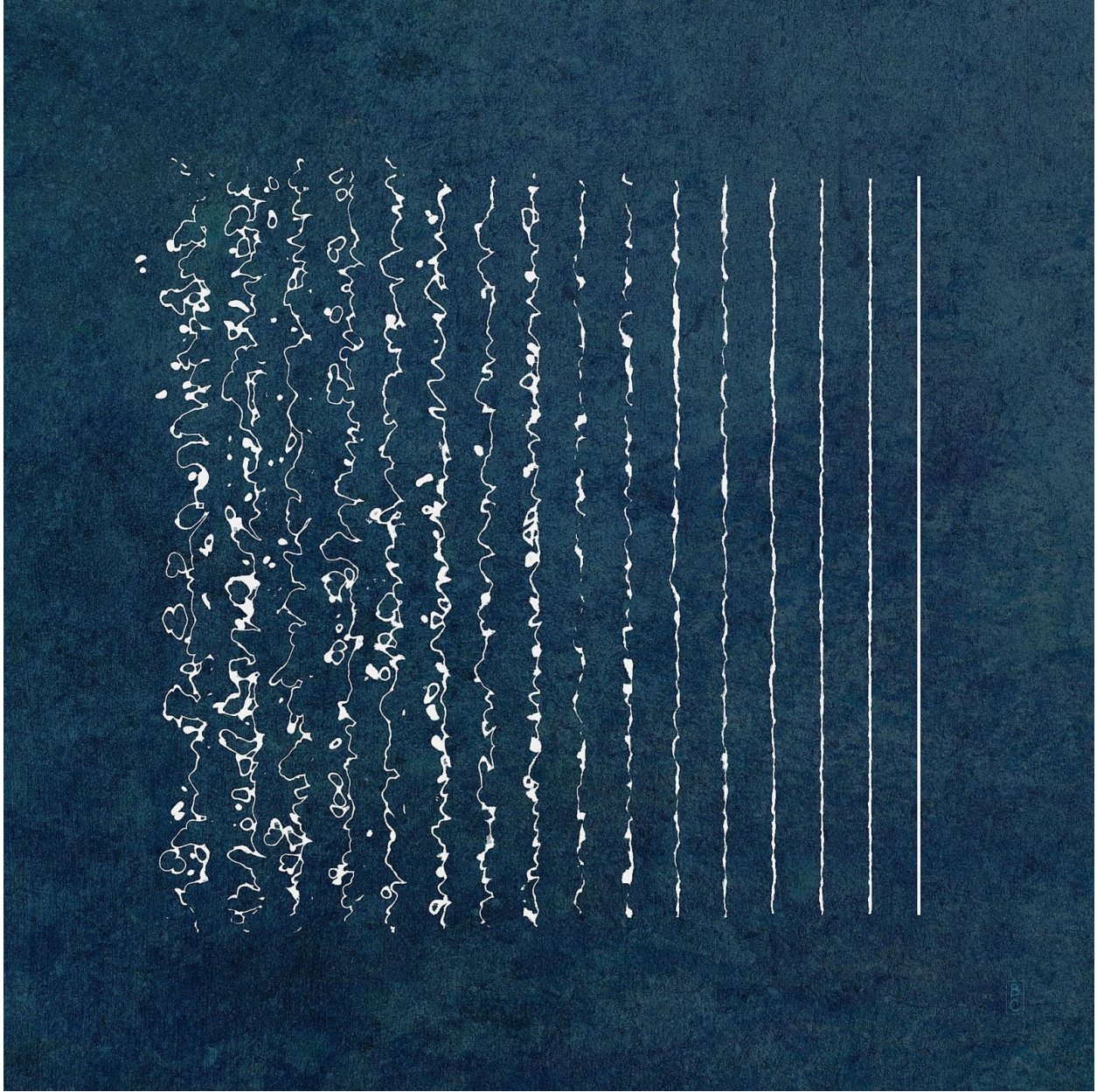
Among visual art genres, minimalist art is where I feel most at home. Its simple forms, limited use of color, and consistent shapes invite more possibility and contemplation to my mind than more complex works of art. I find this especially true with Gospel art where I sometimes feel that making scripture and the divine more concrete somehow leaves one or both more static.

About a year ago, I was delighted to find the work of a Latter-day Saint minimalist artist¹ whose pieces depict gospel themes and stories. Using traditional methods and more contemporary software approaches, he uses simple outlines, color gradients, and a brief commentary to orient the reader to the subject of his piece. As I look at his work, it seems to leave more open possibilities for God's mystery - what we don't yet know about Him - and invites less bounded contemplation. Yet at the same time, its seemingly simple presentation also revealed outlines and broad-stroke shapes that bound God's plans and purpose.

To me, this kind of work represents the work of a scholar of faith, one whose work can only point in the direction and outlines of eternal truth but whose training and observations can bring into relief the discernible shape of God's work and plan.

“Peace, Be Still”

One work in particular from this artist inspires me in my scholarly research and is called *Peace, Be Still*.² True to its genre, the work consists of white lines on a sea-blue background with lighter hues that give the impression of movement. Across the blue backdrop is a series of parallel, vertical white lines. On the left, they can hardly be called lines as they are more like the path of a seismograph chart, chaotic and unpredictable. Moving gradually to the right, though, the chaotic trails of white from top to bottom become more ordered. The billowing peaks and valleys become less pronounced, and eventually, at the farthest right, a single white trail from top to bottom has the perfect edges of something computer-generated.



September 10, 2020. A reference to the hymn “Master, the Tempest Is Raging” and Matthew 8:23–27. Made with Illustrator, SVG, and Photoshop.

This work references the hymn, “Master, the Tempest is Raging,” and Matthew’s account of Jesus, who, in response to the disciples’ fearful plea for help, ordered the crashing and chaotic waves into an ordered stillness (Matthew 8:23–27). Though Matthew’s account suggests a more immediate and literal sea change, the work of art shows a gradual transformation of the waves. For me, the art is an inspiring telling of the story and a representation of the work of a scholar of faith, one who seeks illumination by the light of faith and who hopes that his or her work can, in turn, offer a measure of illumination to others. Some of these aspects I see are the spiritual practice of creating a local order from disorder, bringing clarity to others, and offering a chance for reflection on a divine order.

Local Order Among Disorder

Data science research is one area that highlights the practice of bringing additional order to what was once disordered. When dealing with large volumes of data, analysts even speak of a dataset in terms of the categories “Messy” and “Tidy. When large, raw datasets have been transformed to become Tidy, there is a place for everything and everything is in its place. Anything outside of these conditions can simply be labeled “messy,” or less ideal for visualization or analysis. Certainly, the Tidy-data standard does not mean that every data set would look the same or be used for the same ends. It simply refers to a state in which less-organized data, once opaque and unusable for most viewers, can become a window into previously unseen patterns and illuminate understanding.

More generally, the process of making tidy data and bringing order to our observations seems to be part of something grander and more expansive. Indeed, in the creation story of Genesis, the author indicates that the opportunity to create clarity and order is one of God’s gifts to humankind. With his multi-phase work of creation nearing completion, God gives his children a stewardship and bounded dominion, a chance to share in the ongoing creative process of bringing order to the world for the benefit of others. Later in the text, as man chooses a path leading away from an idyllic ordered garden, God invites more of His children to the work of creation and organization, calling priests, prophets, and prophetesses to invite His children back into the order that He first offered.

Stewardships of Scholars of Faith

For me, the work of a scholar of faith is a continuation of this creative work and stewardship. As scholars accept limited stewardship over a field of competence such as a library of writings, or an enclosure of insects for study, they come to share in a creative process of bringing order and clarity to what was once opaque or disorganized. As they do, discernible patterns may emerge slowly out of the local order they have created or they may burst out seemingly on their own, offering insight, informing action, and challenging the existing consensus.

Scholars of faith can also follow the example of Jesus by bringing calm and certainty to others who are anxious and by inviting reflection. Like Jesus on the waters who brought an ordered calm to a small part of his homeland, his work to reorganize the winds and waves brought relief to his anxious passengers along with calm and clarity. Maybe most importantly, the timely organization he brought to the wind and waves also brought insight and a space for reflection. In the sudden calm, the relieved passengers wondered aloud “What manner of man” rode with them

in the ship? The new arrangement of wind and waves prompted spiritual reflection for those then present and readers of the story for centuries to come. When they saw the order He had created, the fishermen saw the source of the order more clearly, catching a better glimpse of His divine nature. Of course, the specific type of order that Jesus brought to the sea that night was not the only (or even ideal) order possible for the waves and winds, but it was what was needed then.

Likewise, as scholars of faith, we seek to bring an order to our observations, ideally in response to specific needs, and in service to our fellow passengers on the journey of life. In a limited way, we continue the grand ordering work of creation initiated in the beginning. In doing so, we can bring insight and clarity to others, and in some cases, peace and reassurance during crisis. Above all, perhaps when others see a portion of God's ongoing creative work in scholarly endeavors, it might prompt a moment of reflection or a small sense of wonder. Certain aspects of our work may even help others come to glimpse the Master of Ocean and Earth a bit more clearly, though not always by name and perhaps only in a minimalist outline.

Turbulent Times as a Language Learner

Over the last decade, my journey has been enriched by scholars of faith within and without my faith tradition. One path of this journey, studying the Arabic language, has been particularly meaningful because my experiences with scholars of faith in this field led me to my current field of academic study. As a long-time learner of Arabic, I have been blessed by scholars like these who have brought clarity and an order to a learning process that has occasionally felt rocky and tempestuous.

Early in my studies of Arabic, I was enchanted by the language and the culture of its generous speakers to a degree that surprised me. Something about the friendships I was making and the goodness I felt in the Arabic speakers I was meeting compelled me to keep learning. With time, there somehow seemed no alternative left to me than to master the language completely and become, as I imagined it, a replica of the Arabic speakers I spent time with. From my initial vantage point, I was fairly certain this goal was well within reach. Certainly, the gaps I saw in my linguistic and cultural proficiency weren't anything that a few years and hard work couldn't take care of.

My perspective shifted, however, as the months progressed and as my ears, mind, and eyes became more attuned to the language. I could *hear* more of what people were saying with their mouths and began to *see* how much more they were saying with their hands, posture, and intonation. The more I learned to observe, the more the gap between me and other Arabic speakers seemed to be growing rather than shrinking. Finally, I came to see that my idea of becoming a linguistic "clone" of sorts was possible only in very limited ways. There simply wouldn't be enough years to reach a level where I was consistently indistinguishable from most native speakers.

During my minor linguistic crisis, I started to feel turbulence, a conflict between my hopes and the widening gaps in my language proficiency. It was during this time that the work of scholars of faith, both within and without my faith tradition, stepped in, as it were, and helped bring a sense of order. They brought a measure of calm and clarity, not just to my hopes for language learning, but also to my action as a hopeful language student. Through their writings and

presentations, I came to see that my aspirations, while perhaps detached from the realities of adult language acquisition, were not uncommon for learners, and neither was my disappointment at the seemingly unbridgeable gap between me and what I thought I needed to achieve. The experience and knowledge of these scholars, a product of years of carefully gathering and ordering data, helped me make peace with my unrealized hopes and chart a more productive path forward.

Through their work, they helped me see where I might expect to see persistent gaps between my language and another's but also where I might have a good chance at near-native performance. More than that, they also offered me strategies to accelerate my learning and enhance the connections I was making with Arabic speakers, things like how to compare my performance against proficiency benchmarks and how to leverage even mundane interactions as language learning experiences by asking the right questions and keeping a clear mind.

Ultimately, these scholars of faith helped clear a path for me that had felt obstructed by conflicts between hopes and reality. With a new measure of order and healthy direction, I carried on in my language learning, and I even found my way into a Ph.D. program in Second Language Acquisition, studying the learning strategies used by students on study abroad.

Conclusion

My language learning progress doesn't trouble me like it used to, and neither does the extent to which I think people perceive me as "native-like" in one language or another. But from time to time as I write a literature review or analyze data in my academic research, I get a similar woozy feeling looking across what feels like a sea of gaps in my academic knowledge. As I wrestle with these feelings and others like it, I look back to the answers and clarity I received about language learning from scholars of faith. No, there aren't enough years to "learn it all", but there are some areas where I can be successful. With these answers, I also remind myself of the broader work of a scholar of faith. Far from spurring myself to somehow know it all, I try to remember that a more productive focus centers on producing a local, targeted, and relevant order for others. Ideally, what I produce can bring order and clarity to their thinking and possibly even shed light on their next steps.

In this small way, I hope to share in God's creative and ordering work. Perhaps the small taste of order that scholars of faith provide can leave a yearning in others to seek the order that emanates God's ongoing creation. Perhaps it can be an impetus for them to take a step toward the peace and stillness to which He invites us and offer a glimpse, albeit in a minimalist outline, of the heavenly order to which His Son leads us all.

¹ This particular artist is Ben Crowder. He shares his work freely on his website, <https://bencrowder.net/art/>, under a creative commons license.

² <https://bencrowder.net/art/peace-be-still/>