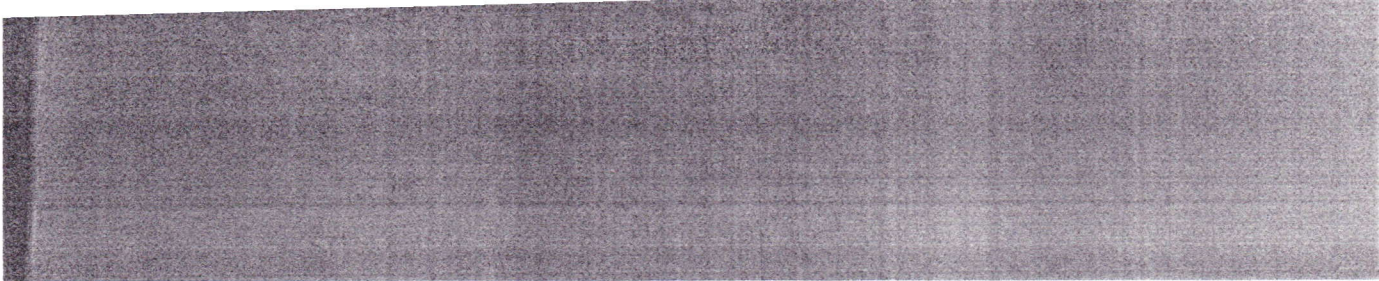


# CHAGALL



AND THE BIBLE

THE JEWISH MUSEUM



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## I. CHAGALL'S *BIBLE*

*Since my early youth  
I have been fascinated by the Bible.  
It has always seemed to me  
and it seems to me still  
that it is the greatest source  
of poetry of all time.  
Since then I have sought  
this reflection in life and in art.  
The Bible is like an echo  
of nature and this secret  
I have tried to transmit.<sup>1</sup>*

Marc Chagall

Marc Chagall's *Bible* (1931–39, 1952–56) represents an enormous undertaking, embarked upon in his middle age and completed only after twenty-five years. It brings together the mature artist's spirituality and childhood's fantasy through the sophisticated artistry of a master printmaker. In Chagall's *Bible*, from *Genesis* through the *Prophets*, the Hasidim of Vitebsk encounter Rembrandt and El Greco beneath the vivid light of Palestine. And as the decade of the 1930s advances, Chagall's depiction of biblical antiquity becomes increasingly expressive of a contemporary world doomed for destruction.

Chagall approaches the *Bible* with an independent and uniquely humanist interpretation. Through psychologically acute portraits of key individuals in decisive moments, Chagall illustrates the Old Testament as a cycle of historic encounters between man and God. His focus on this relationship is made clear by beginning the suite with the creation of man. Drawing upon all the extremes of human emotion and experience within man's life cycle, Chagall illuminates the human condition. Thus, patriarchs, kings and prophets are never idealized but are revealed in their weakness and their strength.

Chagall devises symbolic representations to suggest the presence of God in the *Bible*: disks of light inscribed with God's name, God's rainbow and hands, and, most frequently, God's messengers—the angels. In Chagall's *Bible*, the supernatural and the natural coexist and communicate clearly through expressive glances, gestures and poses.

Chagall's *Bible* etchings range between pure expression and illustration.<sup>2</sup> Some extract the essence of the text while others visually delight in the evocative and descriptive poetry of the verses. Yet each work remains closely allied to the textual source, thereby enhancing the accessibility of its biblical message. Liberated from the distraction of color, Chagall achieves in these black and white prints a concentrated manifestation of humanity and sentiment.<sup>3</sup>

Chagall as a modern artist and as a Jewish artist is freed from the traditional Christian interpretation of the Old Testament, with its emphasis on sin and the prefiguration of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> Chagall's biblical universe prefers to speak of grace and joy, fraternity and love and, if the sadness of the world is also present, then symbols of consolation are always close by.<sup>5</sup>

As Meyer Schapiro has explained, "Chagall's independent vision masters the epic of the *Bible* due to the happy conjunction of his Jewish culture—to which painting was alien—and modern art—to which the Bible has been a closed book."<sup>6</sup> Through these etchings and the large number of monumental, publicly exhibited works they have inspired, Chagall's biblical message is transmitted to people of all faiths in the hopes of fostering human understanding, peace and love.

undulating horizon line echoes the relaxed and rounded contours of his curved arm and bent legs. Although the sun has set, the lightly stippled sky is brilliantly illuminated by a triangular shaft of pure light inscribed at its apex with God's name. Amidst this divine light, a tall ladder rises with two angels ascending and descending. Introducing the dreamer to his dream is an acrobatic Hasid who floats upside down, pointing downward to the visionary and upward to his vision.

There is a curious affinity between Chagall's depiction of the sleeping Jacob and Ribera's treatment of the same subject, which Chagall undoubtedly would have seen in Madrid's Prado Museum during his 1934 trip to Spain. Chagall's treatment of the ladder in this etching as a road to heaven presents a positive image of hope. By the late 1930's, the ladder takes on a negative connotation in Chagall's crucifixion paintings.<sup>80</sup>

## 15. MEETING OF JACOB AND RACHEL

*He said, "It is still broad daylight, too early to round up the animals; water the flock and take them to pasture." But they said, "We cannot, until all the flocks are rounded up; then the stone is rolled off the mouth of the well and we water the sheep."*

*While he was still speaking with them, Rachel came with her father's flock; for she was a shepherdess. And when Jacob saw Rachel, the daughter of his uncle Laban, and the flock of his uncle Laban, Jacob went up and rolled the stone off the mouth of the well, and watered the flock of his uncle Laban.*

Genesis, XXIX, 7-10

The depiction of Jacob and Rachel's first encounter is imbued with Chagall's unique romanticism. Jacob recognizes and embraces the beautiful daughter of his uncle Laban, while she is not yet quite aware of his identity. Jacob is obviously smitten by love at first sight, just as Chagall recalls having fallen in love with Bella.<sup>81</sup> While a flock of young sheep cavort around the open well, the sky is filled with sharp broken lines that express Jacob's high-keyed emotion. Chagall returns to this biblical love story during the last years of his life in his decoration of the *Harpsichord* (1980) for the Museum of the Biblical Message—Marc Chagall in Nice and in the late work *Peasants by the Well* (1981).

## 16. WRESTLING WITH THE ANGEL

*After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions. Jacob was left alone. And*

*a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob."*

Genesis, XXXII, 24-28

Chagall has portrayed an older, more massive Jacob than in the three prior plates. As in Rembrandt's painting of the same subject, Chagall has chosen to depict the moment of the struggle when the Angel has wrenched Jacob's hip at the socket by the pressure of his knee.<sup>82</sup> There is a baroque dynamism in the fleshy, overlapping limbs and the emphatic diagonal movement of the weighted adversaries. Chagall indicates the dawn by contrasting the diagonally striated sky on the left with the lighter, stippled sky on the right.

## 17. RACHEL'S TOMB

*Thus Rachel died. She was buried on the road to Ephrath—now Bethlehem. Over her grave Jacob set up a pillar; it is the pillar at Rachel's grave to this day.*

Genesis, XXXV, 19-20

Chagall visited Rachel's Tomb during his trip to Palestine in 1931 and enjoyed working out-of-doors while he painted this view.<sup>83</sup> The etching replicates the painting, capturing the vivid sensation of the landscape and light. Rachel's Tomb stands alone in the hilly landscape, bereft of human presence. The foreground landscape is animated by alternating horizontal stripes of rocky and smooth ground. The arches and domes of the monument are echoed in the rounded hills and camel. Unique in the *Bible* suite for its lack of human figuration, this etching exudes the poignancy of Rachel's death and her solitary resting place—left behind during the course of Jacob's journey.

## 18. YOUNG SHEPHERD JOSEPH

*This, then, is the line of Jacob: At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father's wives Bilhah and Zilpah. And Joseph brought bad reports of them to their father.*

Genesis, XXXVII,

Set against the clear, bright sky of Palestine, Joseph is represented as youthful, strong, yet gentle. His upright posture and the abrupt shift in scale between

unique leadership, strength and wisdom. The scenes depicted extoll Moses' face-to-face relationship with God, his skill in representing the Israelites before Pharaoh, his efficacy as the agent of God's wrath over Egypt, and his leadership in bringing his people out of bondage and instilling in them God's commandments. These etchings provide a corpus of imagery that Chagall will draw upon for major painting cycles, ceramics, stained glass windows and tapestries for the duration of his career.

In addition to Chagall's skills in characterization and narration in this suite, Chagall is adept at capturing multiple textures through his varied etching techniques. In this plate, densely woven and deeply bitten lines provide the dark cloth of Pharaoh's daughter's gown, her servant's robe, Moses' pitch-covered wicker basket and the thick overhanging foliage. Short vertical lines describe the reeds at the river's edge, while choppy parallel and cross-hatched strokes suggest the grass underfoot. The Nile's swift current is conveyed by the movement of fine horizontal slashes across the white ground. These details reflect the direct impact of the Egyptian landscape on Chagall during his 1931 trip.

## 27. THE BURNING BUSH

*Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him out of the bush: "Moses! Moses!" He answered, "Here I am." And He said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.*

Exodus, III, 1-5

God's presence in the burning bush is described by three concentric circles of light inscribed at their center with God's name. This divine light illuminates Moses' lined and bearded face and is reflected in the rays emanating from his head (prematurely granted to Moses by Chagall before Sinai).<sup>85</sup>

## 28. MOSES AND THE SERPENT

*But Moses spoke up and said, "What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The*

*LORD did not appear to you?" The LORD said to him, "What is that in your hand?" And he replied, "A rod." He said, "Cast it on the ground." He cast in on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, "Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail"—he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand—"that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Issac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you."*

Exodus, IV, 1-5

Moses' marvel of the rod transformed into a snake provides Chagall with the opportunity to depict another crowd scene full of anecdotal detail. While Pharaoh calmly looks on, his courtiers express their amazement in exaggerated gestures and poses. The deployment of these small figures across the middle-ground lends a Breughelian animation to this scene.

## 29. MEETING OF MOSES AND AARON

*The LORD said to Aaron, "Go to meet Moses in the wilderness." He went and met him at the mountain of God, and he kissed him. Moses told Aaron about all the things that the LORD had committed to him and all the signs about which He had instructed him.*

Exodus, IV, 27-28

On the slope of God's mountain, set against the darkened sky, Moses reveals God's instructions to Aaron. Drawn close together, as if their two heads grew out of one body, their physical proximity symbolizes their shared task and Aaron's designated role as Moses' spokesman. Moses is distinguished by the two rays of light emanating from his head and the tall rod which he will use as a sign to convince the Pharaoh of God's will.

## 30. MOSES AND AARON BEFORE PHARAOH

*Afterward Moses and Aaron went and said to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Let My people go that they may celebrate a festival for Me in the wilderness." But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go." They answered, "The God of the Hebrews has manifested Himself to us. Let us go, we pray, a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God, lest He strike us with*

his might. The temple came crashing down on the lords and on all the people in it. Those who were slain by him as he died outnumbered those who had been slain by him when he lived.

Judges, XVI, 28–30

Chagall depicts Samson pushing rather than pulling the two massive columns and causing them to buckle. His force is magical rather than forceful.<sup>99</sup> The cubistic device of rays of etched lines fanning out from the roof enhances the visual sensation of the movement of the collapsing rear columns.

## 58. ANNA INVOKES GOD

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose.—The priest Eli was sitting on the seat near the doorpost of the temple of the LORD.—In her wretchedness, she prayed to the LORD, weeping all the while. And she made this vow: “O LORD of Hosts, if You will look upon the suffering of Your maidservant and will remember me and not forget Your maidservant, and if You will grant Your maidservant a male child, I will dedicate him to the LORD for all the days of his life; and no razor shall ever touch his head.”

I Samuel, I, 9–11

There is a lovely impressionist quality to Chagall's treatment of this scene. Small delicate touches and subtle flickering accents of light and shade build up the figures of Anna, Eli and the flock of cattle. Very fine, broken outlines define their contours. The brilliant light of Palestine which so overwhelmed Chagall illuminates this scene.

## 59. SAMUEL CALLED BY GOD

Young Samuel was in the service of the LORD under Eli. In those days the word of the LORD was rare; prophecy was not widespread. One day, Eli was asleep in his usual place; his eyes had begun to fail and he could barely see. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was sleeping in the temple of the LORD where the Ark of God was. The LORD called out to Samuel, and he answered, “I'm coming.”

I Samuel, III, 1–4

The object of the angel's visit is the young Samuel, asleep in the Temple, who mistakes God's awakening call for Eli's summons. It is the elderly priest Eli who will enlighten him that he is being called by God.

## 60. ANOINTING OF SAUL

They then descended from the shrine to the town, and [Samuel] talked with Saul on the roof.

Samuel took a flask of oil and poured some on Saul's head and kissed him, and said, “The LORD herewith anoints you ruler over His own people.”

I Samuel, IX, 25; X, 1

Chagall depicts the young Saul as described in the Bible—handsome and a head taller than any of the people.<sup>100</sup> As Samuel anoints Saul, he also places the latter's hand against his heart, foretelling that when Saul will leave Samuel, God will give the young ruler a new heart.<sup>101</sup>

## 61. SAUL AND DAVID

Whenever the [evil] spirit of God came upon Saul, David would take the lyre and play it; Saul would find relief and feel better, and the evil spirit would leave him.

I Samuel, XVI, 23

Chagall portrays the young David as described in the Bible: ruddy-cheeked, handsome<sup>102</sup> and skilled in music.<sup>103</sup> Chagall's rendering seems to be a reversed view of Rembrandt's great painting of the same scene.<sup>104</sup> David's simple robe is filled with light, symbolizing God's spirit in him. Saul, however, is shrouded in black, symbolizing the darkness of evil spirits besetting him. Chagall embellishes the composition with the decorative details of Saul's jewelled crown, elaborately carved throne (with the anachronistic star of David) and the elegantly carved columns and tiles of Saul's court.

Chagall's loving treatment of David in this etching evokes his love for his younger brother, whom he also portrayed as a musician in *David in Profile* (1914). About the young David, who died of tuberculosis in the Crimea, Chagall wrote: “His name is sweeter than a line of horizons and to me it breathes the perfume of my native land.”<sup>105</sup>

Chagall devotes fourteen etchings in the *Bible* to David, the prophet nearest to Chagall's heart because he was an artist.<sup>106</sup> This cycle describes David's complex personality, full of virtues and flaws. These images of David become the prototypes for many of Chagall's works during the 1950s and 1960s: his Biblical Message paintings, his stained glass windows for Metz Cathedral and his tapestries for Israel's Knesset. Chagall occasionally combines the persona of David with the tragic mythical musician Orpheus during these decades in his mural *The Source of Music* (1965–66)<sup>107</sup> for New York's Metropolitan Opera House, in his monumental painting *The Concert* (1957)<sup>108</sup> and in the Nef Collection mosaic in Washington, D.C.