



Marc Chagall in 1920 | Public domain, via Wikipedia

Dreaming the Bible

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By Sue Careless

Marc Chagall and the Bible has traveled to 30 different venues in five years, and this showing at Wycliffe College represents its first appearance in Canada. The free exhibition showcases ten etchings and 42 luminous color lithographs by the renowned artist Marc Chagall (1887-1985). These prints are from the Bowden Collections, which offer a variety of traveling exhibitions on spiritual themes. Collector and artist Sandra Bowden delivered a lecture September 12 at the college.

Moishe Chagall was born in 1887 into a devout but poor Hasidic family in Vitebsk, in what is now Belarus. Although Chagall later lived in Berlin, Moscow, New York, Paris, and St. Petersburg, he never forgot his Jewish shtetl and would often portray its simple village life in his works.

Vitebsk's population was divided between Hasidic Jews and Russian Orthodox Christians. Young Moishe's first exposure to art likely occurred when he slipped into the Russian churches and spied their glorious icons. Virtually all the Jewish inhabitants of his shtetl were murdered during

the Holocaust, so Chagall could only return to it in his imagination. And so we see in his art his village of wooden houses — sometimes set on fire — and the domes of Orthodox churches.

Although Judaism has restrictions about the pictorial portrayal of certain religious subjects, Chagall managed to use his fantasy and folk imagery to circumvent those restrictions.

“I did not see the Bible, but I dreamed it, even as a child,” Chagall said. “Since my childhood, [the Bible] has filled me with a vision about the fate of the world and inspired me in my work. ... I see the events of life and works of art through the wisdom of the Bible. Since in my inner life the spirit and world of the Bible occupy a large place, I have tried to express it.”

In describing his childhood nightmares, Chagall alludes to the frightening imagery of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by his father. In the etching *Sacrifice of Abraham*, the patriarch appears dressed in a heavy Hasidic coat and black hat.

Chagall has an almost childlike visual vocabulary. A number of motifs reoccur in his work: a cow represents the rural life par excellence; a tree suggests life; a rooster implies fertility; a flying herring commemorates his father's profession as a fishmonger; a donkey is considered a peaceful and good-natured animal; two candlesticks refer to the Sabbath; a goat is a symbol of atonement; and angels substitute for an image of God.

But along with rural and Jewish symbols, many of his works include a Madonna and Child. And over 100 pieces include the crucifixion as a reference or the main subject. Two colored lithographs in this exhibition demonstrate his attraction to the crucified Christ.

In *Mystical Crucifixion*, a prayer shawl covers Jesus' loins, lest we forget that he was a Jew. Does this also symbolize the sufferings of the Jewish people? Christ is off to one side while a mother and child occupy the other side. Is he portraying the Madonna and Christ child, or his wife, Bella, with their child, Ida? Or both? In the middle dominating the lithograph is a huge red heifer, the appointed sacrifice for the birth of the firstborn.

In *Christ in the Clock*, the crucifixion image is perhaps more problematic for some viewers. Instead of a human head, we see a clock and an inscription nailed to the cross containing simply Chagall's name.

"For me, Christ is a great poet, the teaching of whose poetry has been forgotten by the modern world," Chagall wrote. The crucifixion is also one of the most poignant symbols of suffering in all of human history.

Unlike many of his contemporary Russian emigres after the Holocaust, Chagall pursued neither realism nor abstract art. In her biography of Chagall, Jackie Wullschlager wrote:

It is impossible to overestimate how eagerly in the 1950s and 1960s a society shattered by war and stunned by the horrors of the Holocaust, and for whom the building of an international peace was the paramount political idea, hungered for an art whose themes were love and religion and welcomed them especially from a Jewish artist-survivor able to encapsulate a lost world in a particular, instantly recognizable set of images. ... Chagall's was a narrative art that met the psychological needs of the age and gave



Mystical Crucifixion, 1938



Abraham and Sarah, 1956

pleasure and consolation as no other visual artist of his stature did at that time.

Chagall delivered art with “an easily accessible spiritual message,” Wullschlager added, while the abstract expressionism of Mark Rothko, another Jewish artist, was “incomprehensible” to the public of that day. “Chagall was a human painter in an age of abstraction.”

Chagall was not drawn to landscapes. In fact, there is no horizon in his works, no separation of earth and the heavens. Instead, all his figures, animals, and objects are caught up in both the earthly and divine. There is a mystical merging. Heaven comes down, with swooping angels and earthly beings lifted up to heaven in a mystical dance. Only Adam and Eve seem grounded in *Paradise I*.

And while there are moments of tender stillness, as in *Abraham and Sarah*, more often Chagall’s world is alive with movement. In *Creation*, birds, animals, and angels swirl around a central vortex of a sun/moon image.

Rather than creating depth and a clear vanishing point, Chagall keeps almost all his figures in the foreground. Any distant objects are just made smaller. And in the same work there is often both suffering and joy, playfulness and pathos.

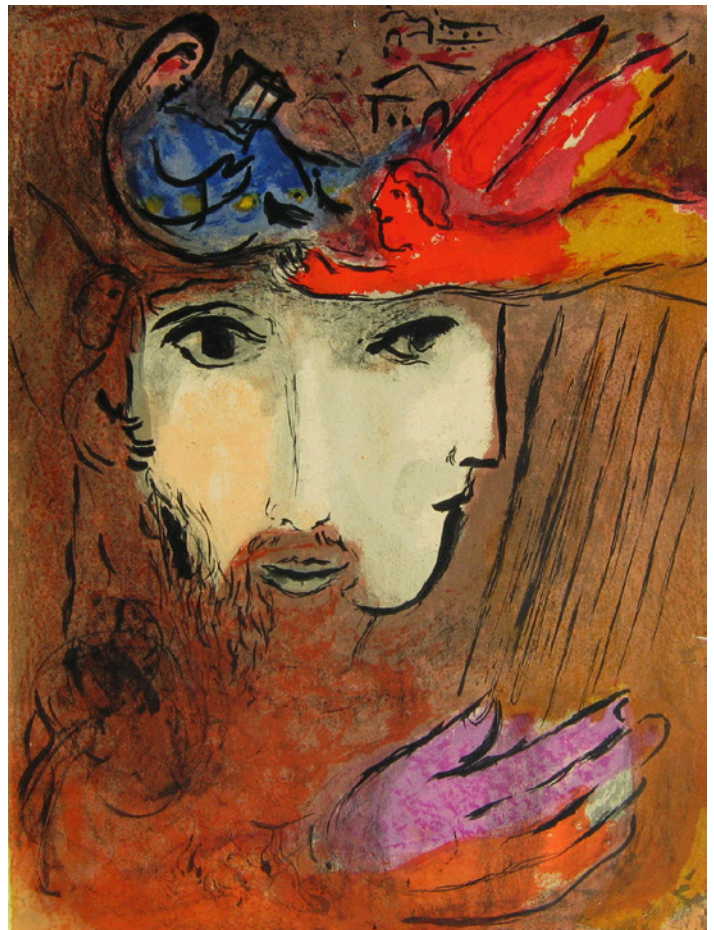
Women are a recurring image in this biblical collection: Eve, Sarah, Hagar, Rachel, Tamar, Rahab, Naomi, Ruth, Michal, Bathsheba, Vashti and Esther. Ruth’s story is told in five lithographs and Eve’s in eight. These are no Sunday school pictures — there are many nudes — but the Bible comes alive in these prints.

In *Paradise I* we see Adam and Eve cojoined at the waist, while in the portrayal of the morally fraught narrative of *David and Bathsheba*, the two are cojoined at the head, David staring at the viewer while Bathsheba is seen in profile.

Bowden considers Chagall the foremost Jewish visual interpreter of the Bible in the past century. Bowden is a painter and printmaker whose work has been exhibited in the Vatican Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, the Museum of Biblical Art in New York, and the Haifa Museum.

For Bowden, Chagall’s lithographs are “luminous; the colour radiates off the page.” The etchings are more intimate, but both make Scripture more alive.

The collector challenged her audience at Wycliffe: “Is there something in your home that tells those who enter, these are a people of faith?” Observant Jews place a mezu-



David and Bathsheba, 1966

zah by their front door. “We can’t impact the world unless we have a visual vocabulary.”

She shows great generosity in making her various collections available to not only museums and art galleries but also colleges and churches. At one church in North Carolina, a fire broke out and endangered her entire Chagall collection. Yet firefighters doused the flames and managed to carry out all 59 pieces,

The water damage was significant, but parishioners, many of them artists, and then art restorers rushed in to dry and preserve the works. Only one piece was lost. Despite this loss, Bowden believes sharing her collections with the public is worth the risk.

A History of these Images

In 1930 French art dealer Ambroise Vollard commissioned Chagall to create etchings for a series of illustrated books, including the Bible.

Between 1931 and 1934, in preparation for such a monumental project, Chagall visited the Holy Land for two months, and then went to Amsterdam to study the biblical paintings of Rembrandt and El Greco.

He returned to France and, by 1939, he had finished 66. Vollard died that same year. When the series of 105 etchings was completed in 1956, it was published by Edition Tériade.

Marc Chagall and the Bible contains ten of the 105 etchings but also all 42 colored lithographs from his 1956 and 1960 suites of the Bible.

Art historian Jean Leymarie has described these drawings by Chagall as “monumental” and “full of divine inspiration. . . . Each picture becomes one with the event, informing the text with a solemn intimacy unknown since Rembrandt.”

But not long after Chagall began his work on the Bible, Hitler gained power in Germany. In 1937 Joseph Goebbels ordered about 20,000 works from German museums confiscated as “degenerate.” Although Germans had once adored Chagall, the Nazis now made a mockery of his art.

After Germany invaded France, the Chagalls moved south from Paris to Vichy France, unaware that French Jews were being rounded up and sent to concentration camps. In 1941, at almost the last moment, the family escaped to America. Chagall lived in New York for seven years, then in 1948 he returned to live permanently in France. His beloved wife, Bella, had died in New York.

Chagall had been swept up in the horrors of European history between 1914 and 1945: world wars, revolution, ethnic persecution, the murder and exile of millions. He



David with His Harp, 1956

represented this in his art, with subjects that included the crucifixion and scenes of war.

As an adult, Chagall was not a practicing Jew, and remained ambivalent about religion. Yet through his art he tried to suggest a more universal message, using both Jewish and Christian imagery.

At the opening of the Chagall Museum in Nice, France, the artist said, “My painting represents not the dream of one people but of all humanity.”