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Title: Nostalgic impulse : Marc Chagall's trilogy of illustrated books in France

Issue Date: 2012-11-28

IV. CHAPTER FOUR - The Quest of God: *La Bible*

If I were not a Jew, I wouldn't have been an artist; or I'd be a different artist altogether.

Marc Chagall,
Leaves from My Notebook

Satisfied with Chagall's creativity in *Les Âmes Mortes* and *Les Fables*, Vollard gave him another *commission* that suited the artist's origins: the illustrations for *La Bible*.¹⁹¹ The project was initially titled "The Book of Prophets" (*Le Livre des Prophètes*), but later the publisher and the artist agreed on a broader version of the complete illustration for the Hebrew Bible, or in Christian terms, the Old Testament. It might be hard to believe that the subject of the Bible could still fascinate modern artists. However, for Vollard it was his ambition to publish a modern version of the Bible and, according to Chagall, the assignment meant a quest for the roots of his identity rather than merely another artwork:

I went to verify feelings, without a camera, without even a brush. [...] There, far away, bearded Jews dressed in blue, yellow, red, wearing fur caps, go and come back to the Wailing Wall. Nowhere will you see so much despair, so much joy; nowhere will you be so distressed and so happy as when seeing the

¹⁹¹ Though published in French at last, Chagall should have used the Yiddish *Bible* for reference when he made the illustrations. The assumption is based on two factors: first, in his correspondence with Koenig in 1925 he asked his Yiddish friend to find him a Yiddish Bible, since Chagall did not read Hebrew very well. Second, he once mentioned to Franz Meyer that Bella "read passages from the Bible aloud to him in Yiddish." See Wulfschlag, *Chagall: Love and Exile*, London: Allen Lane, 2008, p.325, 361-2. Again, to make it specific, I will use its French title "*La Bible*" when referring to this Vollard edition, and "The Bible" as a general term when mentioning the Jewish/Christian holy book.

age-old mass of stones and dusts of Jerusalem, of Safed, of the mountains where prophets are buried over prophets.¹⁹²

Chagall took this commission so seriously that he made several trips especially for this illustration project. He insisted on going to the Holy Land of Palestine and Egypt to touch the earth himself. He did this in 1931; later on he made a journey to Amsterdam to study Rembrandt's drawings of biblical scenes, whose influence can be observed in his finished works; and in 1934, even without Vollard's financial support because of the depression, he still managed to make a journey to Spain in order to encounter the works of the painter El Greco.¹⁹³

The path to this modern-illustrated Bible was nevertheless tough. With Vollard's accidental death in 1939, followed by the onset of the Second World War and the rise of anti-Semitism, Chagall had to leave his work behind and flee to the United States in 1941. Sixty-six plates were completed and printed before Vollard's death and were already in the publisher's possession; thirty-nine plates remained shelved and were only resumed upon Chagall's return to France in 1952. Like the works of *Les Âmes Mortes* and *Les Fables*, the project was finally continued and published by Tériade in 1956.

In this *Bible* illustration series, Chagall expressed a strong fascination for his Jewish background by his choice of illustrated subjects and his use of Hebrew symbols. In the meantime, his personal views on religious issues can be seen deducted from his pictorial narrations. Starting with *La Bible*, the biblical motif became an on-going subject in his later works, including oil paintings, lithography, murals, stained-glasses and more illustration works. Consequently, this chapter will explore Chagall's Bible illustrations in two parts: first, I will discuss the choice of illustrated subjects and characters that shaped the main focus of the entire series; secondly, I will discuss the pictorial elements with Hebrew and/or Christian roots that show Chagall's religious and artistic perspectives. To conclude my examination of Chagall's treatment of biblical themes, another version of Bible illustrations from 1960 will be compared and analysed, so as to evaluate Chagall's biblical messages as a whole.

¹⁹² Sorlier, *Chagall by Chagall*, Harrison House, 1979, p.195; also quoted in Jean Bloch Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible*, Universe Books, 1987, p. 15.

¹⁹³ For the detailed records of Chagall's trips during this period, see Wullschlager, *Ibid*, p.353-354.

1. An Artist's Story of a People

When we examine Chagall's choice of *La Bible*, one might notice that Chagall stuck to those themes concerning the history of Israel and the inheritance of God's covenant. Under this premise, most parts of Genesis and many important books are omitted, while some of the most unlikely illustratable texts are included. Meyer Schapiro classifies Chagall's choice of illustrations in three groups:

- a) The great ancestors who founded the Jewish community and received from God a covenant and law;
- b) The achievement of nationhood with Joshua, Samson, David, and Solomon;
- c) The prophets, in their integrity and solitude, their vision of God and prophecies of the misfortunes and consolations of Israel.¹⁹⁴

Awareness of being Jewish, as Schapiro asserted, is evidently shown through Chagall's choice of subjects. His choices thus link the history of the beginning of the world with Jewish destiny in modern society. It is also important to point out the differences between the first and the second part of the illustration series divided by Chagall's return from the United States. The hazy texture and bold composition in the latter contrast strongly with the soft tones and relatively delicate lines in the former; the solid mass of figures and the rough rendering of the crowds in the later part, such as in "Capture of Jerusalem" (illu. 101), also differ from the subtle depictions in the former part as in "The Exodus from Egypt" (illu. 33). The obvious difference between these illustrations hints at the influence of the contemporary milieu, to which Chagall displayed explicit empathy and identification.

The Image of Great Ancestors

Among many other important figures in Genesis and Exodus, Chagall focused his *illustrations* on those who contributed to the establishment of the Jewish faith and Israeli tribes. After the Creation of Man, the first illustration he chose was Noah with the dove of the ark (illu. 2), the symbol of a new hope. It is interesting to point out that Chagall omitted all other stories before Noah, not even mentioning the flood itself, but started from God's new covenant with man.

Therefore, he chose to illustrate Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph and Moses, with whom God had made covenants respectively, and although he often

¹⁹⁴ Meyer Schapiro, "Chagall's Illustrations for the Bible", *Modern Art 19th & 20th Centuries*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1978, p. 121-134.

depicted them with conventional attributes, he also frequently diverged from the representational traditions on the basis of his own interpretations.

Chagall's depiction of Moses is a typical example of conventional representation influenced by individual expression. Chagall depicted him with two bright rays on his head like two huge horns. According to the text, Moses comes down from Sinai with a ray of light shone on his face.¹⁹⁵ This image of horned Moses has a longstanding history, which is familiar to readers through Michelangelo's famous sculpture of Moses with two little horns on his head. However, this iconology actually came from a misreading, since the root of the Hebrew phrase (פְּנֵי עוֹר קָרְן) can be explained as either "horn" or "ray of light", depending on the context.¹⁹⁶ However, Chagall's depiction shows more affinity with Gustave Doré's rendering of the "rays":¹⁹⁷ they both show two unrealistic rays of light shining out above Moses' head instead of real "horns" (fig. IV-1). On the other hand, Chagall's perception of the rays is still different from Doré's in the sense that the latter only presented them once in the illustration of "Moses Coming Down From Mt. Sinai";



Figure IV-1 Moses Showing the Ten Commandments

¹⁹⁵ Exo34: 29-30 "And it came to pass, when Moses came down from mount Sinai with the two tables of testimony in Moses' hand, when he came down from the mount, that Moses wist not that the skin of his face shone while he talked with him. And when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone; and they were afraid to come nigh him." All quotations from the Bible in this thesis come from the King James Version.

¹⁹⁶ Schapiro has argued that Chagall should have known the Jewish legend that Moses' face shone before his second descent from Mt Sinai, and his borrowing of the image of a horned Moses comes from a more Christian detail. However I'd like to suggest that this might also stem from another artistic context such as Doré's depiction. For Schapiro's argument, see Schapiro, *Ibid*, p.126-127.

¹⁹⁷ Gustave Doré made hundreds of illustration for a new English *Bible* edition. Published in 1866, these illustrations are used in many editions of *Bible* in many languages.

yet Chagall showed them as a permanent attribute for Moses, from the first piece of adult Moses in front of the burning bush (illu. 27) to the last one of “Moses' Blessing over Joshua” (illu. 42).

For Chagall, it is clear that the purpose of his Bible series is not a faithful illustration accompanying the text, but a narration retold by the artist himself with adaptation of traditional iconography. In this sense, Chagall's Moses does not merely function as a character from the Bible, but as an icon of the great ancestor of the artist's origin.

The depiction of Abraham, on the other hand, shows another aspect of Chagall's interpretation of the Bible. This great father of faith is portrayed as a God-fearing and human-loving figure: he is shown executing the circumcision of the new-born, entertaining the angels with hospitality, sacrificing his beloved son, and mourning his wife Sarah. In Chagall's later oil paintings based on the compositions of this etching series, he shows the religious significance of this legendary ancestor. In his oil painting “Le sacrifice d'Isaac” (1966, fig. IV-2), the composition and elements like the two figures, the angel and the lamb, remain similar to the earlier etching “The Sacrifice of Abraham” (illu. 10), while the scene of Christ on the way to Golgotha is juxtaposed with the original composition. The lamb as a substitute for the sacrifice, the symbol of Christ, appears under the tree in both compositions. Chagall obviously adopted the Christian interpretation of seeing this episode as an analogy of God's sacrifice of His own son. This is the way Chagall mixed diverse thoughts while emphasizing the Jewish context.

Besides incorporating both Jewish and Christian views of the biblical figure, the specific use of colours in this image is also worth mentioning. The drypoint and etching in the original black-and-white illustration already create a gradient tone as if painted; in the oil painting version, colours are released and flow freely on the canvas. Here, colours are applied independently from the contours of the objects, as the way images are created independent from words. The basic colours red, blue, yellow and brown construct the scene, and the way the red colour spreads out from the cross to cover Abraham and Isaac seems to imply that the blood of Christ redeems the mortal beings.

The Image of National Heroes

While Moses bears his permanent rays of light, his successor Joshua has a flexible appearance in the nine illustrations Chagall devoted to him. From an armed warrior in “Joshua Armed by God” (illu. 43) to a spiritual leader with the costume of a rabbi in “Joshua Reads the Words of the Law” (illu. 47), Joshua keeps changing forms from a glorious king when he enacts God's miracle of stopping

the sun (illu. 48) to a praying elder in front of the Rock of Shechem¹⁹⁸ in an expression resembling Chagall's "Praying Jew" (1923). Unlike Moses, portrayed as an eternal figure shining with God's glory, Chagall highlighted all of the diverse aspects of Joshua: he is not only a military leader but also a spiritual one. He is the inheritor of God's kingdom in Chagall's eyes, even at a time when the Jews were not ruled by themselves.

Chagall shows a similar rendering of King David, one of his favourite biblical characters. Although the appearance of King David does not vary physically in the same way Joshua does, Chagall still succeeded in portraying different dimensions of his life. He did not emphasize David's militant characteristics, for this is well-known to everyone, but rather portrayed him as a brave and blessed young man before Saul (illu. 60-64), a God-worshiping king and a psalm author (illu. 66, 68, 74), while simultaneously showing him as an intrigued lover (illu. 69, 75) and desperate father (illu. 70, 71, 73).

An important dimension of King David can be related to Chagall's Hasidism background. As mentioned in the earlier chapters, the essence of Chagall's storytelling is closely linked to the Hassidic teachings of his childhood. Owing to the praising and festive rituals of this sect, he renders Jacob's ladder playfully (illu. 14): a bearded Jew¹⁹⁹ floats upside down introducing the angelic dream to the sleeping Jacob. Chagall did not omit the scenes of dancing and singing in the Old Testament, even though those are not the main plots in the Bible narration. He adds an illustration of Miriam alone, the female leader of worship ("Dancing of Miriam, Sister of Moses", illu. 35) and he depicts King David with even greater sympathy, dancing and playing his lyre on the way carrying the Ark ("The Ark Carried to Jerusalem", illu. 68) as well as the king hymning with both arms upward to the Almighty God ("Song of David", illu. 74) as the lyrics, written in Hebrew characters, shine in the air under heavenly light. The artist's background in Hasidism can be recognized in the images of biblical stories.²⁰⁰

After depicting songs and dances, Chagall did not forget to consider another human aspect of King David, who lusted over his servant's wife Bathsheba and made this mistake at huge cost. Chagall chose the scene of David

¹⁹⁸ Jos24: 27 "And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the LORD which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God."

¹⁹⁹ Rosensaft assumed this black-robed and long-bearded figure is a Hasid, which is not yet evident. See Rosensaft, *Ibid*, p. 131-132.

²⁰⁰ The connection between Hasidic teachings and the scenes of celebration is also mentioned in Rosensaft, *Ibid*, p.13-14.

overlooking Bathsheba in the bath, where the king leans forward, echoing the position of the tree on the right, to show his obsession for the woman. He also represented the scene of Bathsheba at the old king's feet begging him to anoint her son Solomon as the successive king. These two scenes with Bathsheba demonstrate how the great king fell for love and how his emotion largely determined his life. Likewise, the scenes with Absalom show David's genuine affection for his son ("David and Absalom", illu. 70) and also his grave anguish when, hearing the news of Absalom's death ("David Mourns Absalom", illu. 73), he sat against the wall of Jerusalem weeping in his palms, unable to see the great rising sun.

As the righteous Noah is shown naked and drunk ("The Mantle of Noah", illu. 5) and Lot is shown sleeping with his daughter, Chagall chose to portray David in the same natural way. Rather than a national leader or a historical legend, King David is more of a human being caring for his loved ones, whether it is his God, his wife or his son and carried away by sexual desire. This erotic dimension is accented in Chagall's later work "David et Bethsabée" (fig. IV-3), part of a set for the magazine *Verve* in 1956, where the faces of David and Bathsheba are united together, surrounded by a red angel and other biblical figures. Against the red-ochre background, this double sight shows again King David's strong connection and affection towards the woman, turning the original biblical rape story into a love story.

Though Chagall focused his illustrations on the great leaders of Israel, he tended to depict them in a personal way quite different from the traditional rendering. Once again, this implies that Chagall's biblical images are personal, artistic views rather than conventional religious illustrations.

The Image of the Prophets

Chagall's book of prophets starts with the evocative etching of "Prophet Killed by a Lion" (illu. 82). The image of the prophets is the most mysterious and perplexing one in Chagall's Bible. In the post-war era, Chagall displayed disturbing scenes and figures in the latter half of this illustration series. He devoted most etchings of prophets to Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. If we read along this storyline of Chagall's Bible, it is easy to conclude that his deployment of prophetic visions recalls a straightforward message: from the miracle-enacting Elijah, to the weeping prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the visionary Ezekiel, one can see a reinforcement and retelling of the fate of modern Israel. Once blessed as God's chosen people, they went through the suffering of the Holocaust, but they will meet Ezekiel's powerful vision eventually. Read as a separate narration of Jewish people independent of the original text of the Bible, Chagall's story of men starts from being created in God's hand and ends with the

heavenly scroll passed down by the hands in the cloud.²⁰¹ The sequence of stories testifies to the destiny of human beings in the Almighty's hands.

What Elijah, Isaiah and Jeremiah have in common is their mourning of Jerusalem. Chagall depicted them in a posture of deep grief. "Elijah on Mount Carmel" (illu. 86), "Isaiah's Prayer" (illu. 99) and "Sufferings of Jeremiah" (illu. 103) all show the prophets, able to see the future prospects beforehand, in desperate prayer and mourning for their people. The solid figures of the prophets occupy the centre of the composition without other intruding elements. The bodily presentation reminds us slightly of Chagall's "Green Jew", created at the start of the war in 1914, but instead of using mixed hazy colours, the medium of etching allows rougher and fiercer textures, so as to show the profound sorrow and anxiety in a more expressive way.

Therefore, this sorrowful journey of prophets cleverly concludes with the two pieces of Ezekiel's revelation. This captured and weeping prophet would become the hope-receiving one, in the same way as the occupied and suffering Jerusalem would be set free again. In the artist's rendition of the nation, the biblical message is responded with a contemporary comprehension. The sense of nostalgia is expressed not only towards the Land of Promise, but also towards the unobstructed connection between God and humanity in the Old Testament days.

2. Hebrew Roots or Christian Thoughts

In the same way we saw Russian elements appearing in the illustrations in *Les Âmes Mortes* and French ones in *Les Fables*, many pictorial elements with Hebrew roots can at first glance be recognised in Chagall's Bible. This includes the repetition of Hebrew characters, the Star of David, and the vivid depiction of Palestine views based on his earlier journey. As we observe more closely, we can find other influences from Christian thoughts and/or the artist's personal views.

The illustration of "The Child Revived by Elijah" (illu. 84) is a good example that embodies all of the Hebrew elements mentioned above with religious and individual infusions. The story, frequently interpreted by Christian theologians as the foretelling or analogy of Jesus' resurrection, explains how the prophet Elijah raises the son of the widow of Saperta from the clutches of death. In Chagall's etching, the tetragrammaton, God's name in four Hebrew letters (יהוה)

²⁰¹ Eze2: 8-10 "But thou, son of man, hear what I say unto thee; Be not thou rebellious like that rebellious house: open thy mouth, and eat that I give thee. And when I looked, behold, an hand was sent unto me; and, lo, a roll of a book was therein; And he spread it before me; and it was written within and without: and there was written therein lamentations, and mourning, and woe."

²⁰², is encircled by a frame-like Star of David, out of which shines God's radiance in concentric circles. The rim of the light circle touches the dead child as if God's healing power is working on him when the prophet cries out and prays to the Lord.

The circle of light is not an uncommon way to imply God's presence in visual representation; the Star of David with the tetragrammaton, albeit with its strong Jewish allusion, is more often seen in a Christian context, for Jewish people rarely inscribe God's name except in the scrolls. However, in "The Child Revived by Elijah", the way Chagall used the tetragrammaton with full vowel points (יהוה) is quite rare, even rude for some religious people, for it is like calling God's ineffable name directly without using any euphemisms. It is unlikely that Chagall did this out of ignorance, since he grew up with the teachings of the Bible and the Talmud. Chagall's depiction not only shows the iconography from both Judaism and Christianity, but also the freedom of presenting images for art's sake.

Furthermore, if we bear in mind that the latter part of this illustration series was resumed after the Second World War, we can see the artist's response to the meaning of the Star of David, the symbol of Jewish identity. While the symbol was once humiliating as the yellow badge marking the identity of Jewish people during Nazi oppression, Chagall glorified it as God's presence within this very symbol, reassuming that the essence of Jewishness lies in their belief of being God's chosen people, and that their glory from God shines out through this symbol of their identities. The theme of this illustration is Elijah raising the window's child from death. This also corresponds to the revival of the Jewish nation after the war. The connection between the Old Testament and the 20th century is therefore made explicit.

3. The Presence of God and Angels

In a similar way as in "The Child Revived by Elijah", instead of depicting the image of God directly, Chagall tends to use various indirect ways to show the presence of God, such as the light circle with shining rays, arms/hands stretching out from the clouds,²⁰³ angels in the role of God's agent, or more frequently, God's

²⁰² The four Hebrew letters יהוה are usually transliterated as "YHWH" and often rendered as "Yahweh" in English. However, when reading the Bible, the Jews usually pronounce it as "Adonai" ("the Lord" in English) out of the respect for God's name. The vowel points of the tetragrammaton vary in different scrolls and also in different ages; the vowel points Chagall used in "The Child Revived by Elijah" are common in manuscripts. See the discussion below in this section.

²⁰³ As shown in "Moses Receives the Tablets of the Law" (37) and the last piece "Calling of

name written in tetragrammaton as we have seen above. In some cases, it is the combination of representations, as in “Isaiah's Prayer” (illu. 99), God's name written in a circle of radiance and pointed out by an angel as God's intermediate,²⁰⁴ or more specifically, in the “Calling of Jeremiah” (illu. 100), an angel enacting God's role by carrying God's burning circle of light in his chest.²⁰⁵

At first glance, all of these renderings seem to be variations of the Jewish taboo of depicting God's image. Nevertheless, if we observe the whole series and also compare it with Chagall's other similar biblical subjects, we will easily find that the non-personification of God's image is not entirely a religious issue, since he did portray God as a human figure sometimes. An example is the image of God, personified as a bearded old man, shown directly in the illustration of the “Death of Moses” (illu. 41). Being the great spiritual leader of the Israeli people all his life, Moses was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, but in Chagall's interpretation he was rewarded with God's glory. If we compare this with Chagall's later lithography series in *The Story of Exodus* (1966),²⁰⁶ God's image appears as a glorified king in “God Directs Moses to Make Vestments for Use in the Sanctuary” (fig. IV-4). Apparently, Moses cannot see the physical presence of the Lord, for his head turns another direction while listening carefully to His directions. We can conclude that for Chagall, the personification of God is not “forbidden” but “unnecessary” in most of his biblical themes. When it is needed for reasons of composition or narration, we are able to see God's image through the artist's imagination.

In the very first image of biblical illustrations, “Creation of Man” (illu. 1), Adam's inert body is carried by an angel. At the top of the background overhangs a circle of light with the tetragrammaton inscribed within it. The presence of an angel during this creation act exists neither in Jewish nor Christian thought, but only in the artist's own imagination. In his later oil painting “Création de l'homme” (fig. IV-5), Chagall repeated all the elements of God's light circle and the agent-angel in the etching of Creation. However, a fuller vision of apocalypse is shown here: besides the creation of man, God's circle now shines as a huge rainbow-coloured sun surrounded by major figures in the Bible, including David, Jeremiah, Aaron, Moses and Jesus' crucifixion. This apocalyptic picture is

Ezekiel” (105).

²⁰⁴ The tetragrammaton in this illustration is left-right reversed. It is assumed to be a mistake made during the etching process.

²⁰⁵ This image comes from the text of Jer1: 9 “Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth.” The role of God here is substituted by his angelic messenger.

²⁰⁶ In 1966, Leon Amiel published Chagall's *The Story of the Exodus*, a portfolio containing twenty-four large colour lithographs.

realized in a spiritual way through which men and animals are integrated as God's Creation: Moses receiving the Tablets is represented as a winged being now, and at the bottom-right corner of God's circle is a green goat-headed figure with red Torahs in his hand, which used to be the presentation of the prophet Jeremiah (as in the *Verve* set in 1956) but can also be seen as the artist himself meditating on the entire meaning of creation.

The agent-angel is shown again in the piece "Man Guided by God" (illu. 97), an illustration of prophecy among the last pieces in which a man is led by an angel instead of by God Himself. These two illustrations together indicate the relationship between God and man; from the beginning to the end, man is always taken in God's hands (here the angel's hands). The substitution of an angel as God's agent is a practical way to demonstrate the physical connection between God and human beings.²⁰⁷

Apart from being God's intermediaries, angels play different roles in the Bible series that greatly alter their images. Sometimes they appear as non-human (and hence non-sexual) beings. Like the messenger-angel in "The Sacrifice of Abraham" (illu. 10), only the facial features are recognizable, but the rest of the figure is just vaguely hinted at as a body with two wings. Sometimes they have specific features according to scripture, for example the seraph with six wings in "Vision of Isaiah" (illu. 91).²⁰⁸ In most of Chagall's etchings, however, angels bear individual appearances and/or attributes as they take different roles. For instance, angels can take human figures as they sit at Abraham's table ("Abraham and the Three Angels", illu. 7); they can act as God's spokesmen as they blow horns or read heavenly scrolls ("Prophecy over Jerusalem", illu. 90); they can also dress up as a warrior/executioner with a sword in their hand, as shown in "The Passover Meal" (illu. 32), "Joshua before the Angel with the Sword" (illu. 45), and "Oracle over Babylon" (illu. 93).²⁰⁹

The images of angels show a tremendous change between the first half and the second half of the series due to Chagall's resumption after his return from the

²⁰⁷ Other illustrations with angels enacting God's role include "Joshua Armed by God" (43), "Samuel Called by God" (59), "Solomon's Dream" (77), "God Will Have Pity on Jacob" (94), "Promise to Jerusalem" (96), and "Calling of Jeremiah" (100),

²⁰⁸ Mentioned only once in the Jewish *Bible*, the seraph is perceived as the highest rank of angels. In later iconography it is often depicted in human form with six wings. Chagall's presentation of the seraph is relatively conventional here. The image of seraphim is described in Isa6: 2 "Above it stood the seraphim: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly."

²⁰⁹ This image of the angel does exist in the Bible, as in Gen3: 24 "So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life."

United States. Angels in the later part of the series are often posed in dramatic gestures; their appearance is more personalized and mysterious as well. Although angels are supposed to be genderless in religious views, Chagall often depicted them as inherently male or female, which is also more obvious in the latter half of the illustration series. Examples include the two angels in “Solomon's Dream” (illu. 77) and “Capture of Jerusalem” (illu. 101) with explicit female features. In the case of the four creatures with four faces in Ezekiel's Vision (illu. 104), Chagall chose to depict the man's face with female features.²¹⁰ Chagall's mode of representation claims the artist's freedom to follow his/her own imagination instead of depending on religious interpretation or traditional iconography.

This is demonstrated again by the unconventional gestures of Chagall's angels in the last prophetic images. In “Elijah's Vision” (illu. 88), an unusual choice for Bible illustration, Chagall depicted an angel with expressive gestures mirroring Elijah's movement in God's wind and earthquake.²¹¹ The angel covers his face with one of his giant dark wings, produced freely through Chagall's hazy etchings, and holds up a protective hand as if instructing the prophet with God's oracle. Another similar representation can be found in “Promise to Jerusalem” (illu. 96), where the angel covers himself—supposedly male due to his moustache—with huge floating drapery. The image of the angel is combined with the rainbow of Noah's covenant (“The Rainbow”, illu. 4) and God's circle of light at the right side of the background. In a Blakean breath, the angel's grandiose gesture corresponds to the text “I hid my face from thee”²¹² when the Lord speaks

²¹⁰ In the Bible, the four creatures, said to be the cherubim, are described as having four faces, but Chagall, for aesthetic reasons perhaps, only depicted them as one of each face; their feet are also drawn out of their own kind, not of a calf as the script says. See Eze1: 5-10 “Also out of the midst thereof came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance; they had the likeness of a man. And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings. And their feet were straight feet; and the sole of their feet was like the sole of a calf's foot: and they sparkled like the colour of burnished brass. And they had the hands of a man under their wings on their four sides; and they four had their faces and their wings. Their wings were joined one to another; they turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward. As for the likeness of their faces, they four had the face of a man, and the face of a lion, on the right side: and they four had the face of an ox on the left side; they four also had the face of an eagle.”

²¹¹ 1King11-13: “And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the LORD. And, behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake: And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?”

²¹² Isa54: 8 “In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting

to the prophet about the fate of Israel. Unlikely to be illustrated, Chagall's choice of illustration is unique in terms of both theme and composition. If we place these powerful images in the post-war setting in which he finished the etchings, or more precisely, the establishment of Israel in 1948, then the message in these images of prophecy clearly proclaims the hope of the nation's destiny: God will keep the covenant he made with his people. Therefore, Chagall's angels show the fierceness but also the great mercy of the Almighty Lord in their unique ways of representation.

4. The Visualization of Hebrew Letters

We have already seen Chagall's use of the tetragrammaton to indicate God's presence, usually inscribed inside a circle of light and/or pointed out by a messenger-angel.²¹³ Even without any knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet, readers automatically associate the letters in their minds with the image of God Jehovah. The Hebrew character thereby acquires a new reading: more than a signifier of concepts, the alphabet itself becomes a pictorial element integrated within contextual readings.

The adoption of Hebrew characters in visual compositions is nothing new in Chagall's work. In the cover design for *The Magician* (1915, fig. IV-6) by I.L. Peretz, the title words, suspended in the upper part, are inscribed in a "hollow" style which echoes the hollow figure inclining along the bottom curve of the oval frame. In this way, the words are integrated as part of the pictorial composition; the visual coherence is enhanced by the square-ness of Hebrew characters as well. Similarly, in Chagall's illustration for David Hofstein's *Troyer*, of which the frontispiece has already been discussed in the previous chapter on *Les Âmes Mortes*, the integration of images and Hebrew characters also add a further dimension to the illustrations. Another, more straightforward, example can be found in his cover illustration for the Soviet Yiddish Journal *ShTROM* (1922, fig. IV-7), where the characters themselves become the main pictorial design and are visually geometrized.²¹⁴ From this perspective, Chagall's incorporation of Hebrew characters forms a process starting from visually echoing characters with images,

kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the LORD thy Redeemer."

²¹³ God's name appears in illustrations of Creation of Man, Jacob's Ladder (illu. 14), The Burning Bush (illu. 27), Darkness over Egypt (illu. 31), The Exodus from Egypt (illu. 33), The Child Revived by Elijah (illu. 84), Promise to Jerusalem (illu. 96), and Isaiah's Prayer (illu. 99).

²¹⁴ In his chapter on "The Lost Jewish World", Harshav analysed the typological design of this cover illustration in detail. See Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World*, Rizzoli, 2006, p. 145-146.

to the combination of words with images, and then to the becoming of an image itself. The growing significance of Hebrew characters sheds a different light on Chagall's fascination with his Jewish identity in his illustrations.

As a consequence, it is reasonable to see the appropriation of Hebrew characters reappear in the biblical scenes in Chagall's Bible illustrations starting from 1931. Due to the nature of illustration, the use of Hebrew characters in this series also functions as an indication to the corresponding texts. Examples include Chagall's depictions of the Ten Commandments ("Moses Receives the Tablets of the Law", illu. 37; "Moses Breaks the Tablet", illu. 39; and "Crossing of the Jordan", illu. 44), Aaron's breastplate with the names of Israel's twelve tribes ("Aaron and the Lamp", illu. 40)²¹⁵, Joshua's book of law ("Joshua and the Rock of Shechem", illu. 51)²¹⁶, and God's scroll in Prophet Ezekiel's vision ("Calling of Ezekiel", illu. 105).

It is important to point out that most of the Hebrew texts "transplanted" into the images concern laws and regulations. On the one hand, the inscription of the text directs the reader's attention to the root of the Hebrew scripture and emphasizes the legitimacy of the Israeli nation and its laws. On the other hand, though it seems a direct copy from the Bible itself, it is still the artist's choice that makes the connection between pictures and the written texts. By emphasizing the Hebrew texts, the Israeli tribes and the prophecy, Chagall is once again retelling the story of Israel's past, present and future. The use of Hebrew characters implies more than a mere aesthetic device for his composition.

5. Jewish Symbols and Views of Jerusalem

Apart from the use of alphabets, there are still other examples of Hebrew heritage in *La Bible*. The most obvious should be the repetition of the Star of David. It not only appears reasonable on King Solomon's throne, but also, anachronistically, first on the Ark of Covenant ("Crossing of the Jordan", illu. 44) and Joshua's rock of Shechem (illu. 51) when the time of David has yet to come, and then even more ironically, shines as an ornament on the throne of Saul ("Saul and David", illu. 61; "David before Saul", illu. 64) who would soon be jealous of the young hero. The imaginary arrangement of the Star of David proves again that this

²¹⁵ Exo28: 29 "And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the LORD continually."

²¹⁶ Jos24: 25 "And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak, that was by the sanctuary of the LORD."

illustration is not a faithful depiction from the Bible, but a symbol of authentic Jewishness foregrounded in Chagall's way of storytelling.

The Ark of Covenant embodies the artist's visual vocabulary in another way. The ark, in traditional perception, is supposed to be a chest carried upon two staves, according to the records in the Book of Exodus:

And they shall make an ark of shittim wood: two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof, and a cubit and a half the breadth thereof, and a cubit and a half the height thereof.

-And thou shalt put the staves into the rings by the sides of the ark, that the ark may be borne with them.²¹⁷

However in Chagall's imagination, the Ark is an entirely different object—more like a giant monument engraved with the Tablets of the Ten Commandments²¹⁸, the anachronistic Star of David and two Lions of Judas.²¹⁹ The fact that these details depart from the biblical text might be explained by Chagall's later lithography of "Bezaleel and his two golden cherubim" (fig. IV-8) in the illustrations of *The Story of Exodus* (1966). Here, the gifted craftsman Bezaleel is depicted in the likeness of Chagall's self-portrait; his hand reaches toward the Star of David at the centre, inscribed with the tetragrammaton inside and encircled by a red circle of radiance. The left side of the picture shows a crowned rooster, the mercy seat with two hands on it, two cherubim in the form similar to the lion of Judah,²²⁰ and Bezaleel's golden candlestick.

The fact that Chagall identifies his own image with the biblical artisan implies the status he considers himself to have reached: he is a craftsman inspired

²¹⁷ Exo25: 10, 14.

²¹⁸ The order of the Ten Commandments in "Crossing of the Jordan" is reversed left-and-right from the one Moses received on Mount Sinai, perhaps due to the process of etching making.

²¹⁹ The Lion of Judas comes first from the Book of Genesis, where Jacob describes his son "Judah is a lion's whelp: from the prey, my son, thou art gone up: he stooped down, he couched as a lion, and as an old lion; who shall rouse him up?" (Gen49: 9). Later it becomes the symbol of the Israeli tribe of Judah. In Christian iconology, the Lion of Judah is usually regarded as the symbol of Christ. In Chagall's biblical themes, it often appears in unrelated context, such as on the gate of Solomon's palace ("The Queen of Sheba", illu. 80).

²²⁰ Exo37: 7 "And he made two cherubims of gold, beaten out of one piece made he them, on the two ends of the mercy seat." Although there's no common recognition of the image of cherubim, it is often described as winged angels; in the book of Ezekiel they are four-headed creatures, lion-head included. Therefore Chagall's cherubim with lion's body with man's face can be seen as his unique design.

by God's teachings, but he creates with his artistic eyes. All those familiar elements in Chagall's biblical images, such as the tetragrammaton and the Star of David, serve as continuous symbols of Jewishness without historical accuracy, even though they are rendered as a realistic presentation of a certain moment.

On the other hand, Chagall drew the views of Palestine affectively in distinct realism instead of purely imagination. Thanks to his journey to the Holy Land, he was able to represent the landscapes in relatively realistic detail. One of the examples is the scene of Rachel's tomb (illu. 17), the only scene without any human figures in this series. If we compare the hand-coloured version of Chagall's illustration with a postcard dating from 1910, the landscapes are obviously identical. However, Chagall transferred the picture with a softer touch: the dome of the tomb echoes with the tender curves of nearby hills; the rounded back of the camel and the bending of the grand tree also correspond to this continuous curved line. The sense of nostalgia disperses in the gentle hint of red colour and in the tree's embracing gesture toward the tomb of the wife, buried in solitude and left behind during Jacob's journey.²²¹

The view of Jerusalem appears many times in the whole series, especially in the last few pieces concerning the fate of the city. Chagall depicted the scenes of Jerusalem in two different ways: Jerusalem in King David's time is shown closely, focusing on its solid and formidable ramparts ("King David", illu. 67; "David Mourns Absalom", illu. 73), while the panorama of Jerusalem in the later prophecy is seen from a distance and is usually distorted as in a dream ("Prophecy over Jerusalem", illu. 90; "God Will Have Pity on Jacob", illu. 94; "Deliverance of Jerusalem", illu. 95; "Salvation for Jerusalem", illu. 98; and "Capture of Jerusalem", illu. 101). The last etchings of prophecy differ from all other pieces in this series: mysterious and powerful, they are boldly arranged in surrealist compositions. When Isaiah in his prophecy sees the return of Israel to its own land,²²² Chagall illustrates this scene with Isaiah and an angel, the latter holding tight to the former ("God Will Have Pity on Jacob"). Floating in front of God's circle of light, they overlook the city of Jerusalem and the homecoming of its people together. Suspended above the city is a rainbow, the symbol of God's covenant, upon which the figures of Isaiah and the angel seem to rest. God's

²²¹ Gen35: 19 "And Rachel died, and was buried in the way to Ephrath, which is Bethlehem."

²²² Isa14: 1-2 "For the LORD will have mercy on Jacob, and will yet choose Israel, and set them in their own land: and the strangers shall be joined with them, and they shall cleave to the house of Jacob. And the people shall take them, and bring them to their place: and the house of Israel shall possess them in the land of the LORD for servants and handmaids: and they shall take them captives, whose captives they were; and they shall rule over their oppressors."

promise of Israel's return from exile thus forms the centre of the picture and connects this vision of prophecy with the events in the future.

The vision of the homecoming in Israel is again depicted in "Deliverance of Jerusalem". This time the entire capital and its people is displayed in the big circle of God's light. Here, the flying angel bears obvious Jewish features: he is wearing a traditional phylactery (*tefilin*) on his head²²³ and the Hebrew letters of "Jerusalem" are blown out from his shofar, a horn used for Jewish religious services. The floating circle with the city panorama seems to be blown up from the mouth of the shofar; the awakening of Jewish consciousness is celebrated in this picture.

The circle of light in both illustrations functions as a frame delimiting different times and spaces. The revival of Jerusalem can be seen either as a prediction for the unknown future during Old Testament times or as contemporary scenes coexisting with eternal prophetic calling. As in "Salvation for Jerusalem" (illu. 98), the artist juxtaposes the view of Jerusalem and the newly-married couple, recalling both his personal reunion with his wife Bella and God's reunion with his chosen people. Different temporal events are narrated together in the spatial image, where the everlasting messenger-angel and the Lion of Judah are all present in one space. Chagall, in this way, reveals the message of the life, belief and identity of Jewish people.

6. An Artist's Biblical World: *Verve Bible*

La Bible, commissioned by Vollard, demonstrates the awakening of Jewishness, the influence of Christianity and other art conventions all integrating in the artist's creation. The framing of the series shows the concern for humankind: from the beginning to the end, man has been connected to the almighty God who hides His glorious face behind the clouds. The choice for illustrating *La Bible* not only embodies the artist's own search for ethnic identity, but the seeking of God's image also implies a nostalgic longing for a lost world where all creatures are taken care of under an omniscient higher being.

Ever since Vollard's commission, motifs from the Bible continued in Chagall's artworks and he ultimately contributed an entire museum of biblical works to Nice, France.²²⁴ Some of his other lithography and oil paintings on

²²³ Orthodox Jews usually wear two *tefilin*, one on the head and the other around left arm, as shown in Chagall's "Praying Jew".

²²⁴ Le Musée national Marc Chagall, Nice, was completed and inaugurated on 7 July 1973, Chagall's birthday. In 1967, the Louvre in Paris exhibited 17 large-scale paintings and

biblical subjects have already been examined and compared in the above discussion. In Chagall's biblical world, the lithographs for another version of the Bible, published in the Parisian magazine *Verve* in 1960,²²⁵ stand out as a counterpart to Vollard's *La Bible* and complete Chagall's vision of the biblical world.²²⁶

In his aforementioned classification, Shapiro listed three categories of Chagall's figures in *La Bible*, but he omitted an equally important section: the images of women.²²⁷ Chagall depicted some female characters in *La Bible*, for example Lot's daughters, Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel; Potiphar's wife, Delilah; Bathsheba; the Queen of Sheba; and the widow of Sarepta. None of them are the focus in biblical stories, but they all play an important role in making a turning point in the male-centred narration. Among these female figures, Chagall, following the principle concerning Jewish roots in *La Bible*, had devoted singular portraits to three characters: Moses' sister Miriam, the god-invoking woman Anna²²⁸ and the prophetess Deborah. Each of these women contribute a certain paradigm to the Israeli people, and each of them has a close relationship with God, no less than male heroes or prophets: Miriam as the first-known female leader of worship, Anna as the exemplary figure of her faith, and Debora as God's prophetess in the era of Judges. The original texts on these women are quite brief, but as Chagall chose to depict them in individual portraits, we can see that

38 gouaches under the title "Message Biblique", which he donated to the nation of France on condition that a museum was to be built for them in Nice.

²²⁵ As an important publisher in his time, Tériade's most memorable publishing is the colourful journal *Verve* that included numerous works by the best artists. Without using typography, this magazine is full of artists' handwritings including, among the most well-known, Matisse's *Jazz* in the first volume. In 1956, the project *La Bible* left by Vollard was finally fulfilled by the Swiss publisher Tériade. To celebrate the occasion, Tériade commissioned a set of lithographs on biblical themes for a special number of *Verve*. See Riva Castleman, *A Century of Artists Books*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1994, p. 31-32; also see Wulfschlager, *Ibid*.

²²⁶ To make a difference, I'll call the illustrations for the *Bible* commissioned by Vollard in 1931 as *La Bible*, and the one for *Verve* in 1960 as *Verve Bible*, although it might cause some confusion as well since Chagall had contributed more than one version of biblical lithography to *Verve*, for example another *Bible* series in 1956. Since the *Verve Bible* hasn't been reviewed much in literatures, most discussions about the illustrations are based on my own interpretations.

²²⁷ Since the image of women has played an important role in Chagall's art, the *Verve Bible* featuring female figures can be seen as the artist's interpretation of biblical stories.

²²⁸ According to scripture, Anna was pregnant with Samuel because of her enduring faith and prayer to God. See Sam1: 19-20 "And they rose up in the morning early, and worshipped before the LORD, and returned, and came to their house to Ramah: and Elkanah knew Hannah his wife; and the LORD remembered her. Wherefore it came to pass, when the time was come about after Hannah had conceived, that she bare a son, and called his name Samuel, saying, Because I have asked him of the LORD."

Chagall chose not to omit the female significance when he narrated his storyline visually.

While Vollard's *La Bible* is filled with images of great ancestors, national heroes and prophets, plus occasionally specific women as supporting characters, the *Verve Bible* in 1960 is obviously a women's version: most of the 24 illustrations are women's stories, unmentioned in *La Bible* but now chosen and adorned, including Eve, Sara, Hagar, Rachel, Tamar, Rahab, Naomi, Ruth, Michal, Vasthi and Esther.

The very beginning of the *Verve Bible* starts with a female voice of narration. The first lithography "The Face of Israel" (fig. IV-9) presents an angel with female features announcing God's words to a man and a woman. These could be the general representation of human beings, but could also represent Rebecca and her favourite son Jacob, for the name of Israel appears in the title of the piece.²²⁹ The woman is holding the man to her breast in a protective gesture and she is the one who looks upon and receives the angelic voice. In the far background on the right, a mother with her son reminds us of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, who appear later in this illustration series. Indicating both the face and fate of Israel and the strangers, the frontispiece in this context shows the visualization of femininity and motherhood, and hence a narration dominated by images of women.

Eve is the first female character we encounter in the original Bible and also in this illustration series. The six pieces about Paradise are narrated from Eve's perspective, which was totally omitted in the earlier *La Bible*. We can see her peeking with one eye and playing with the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (fig. IV-10), tempted by the serpent—a beautiful creature with a human face by then, sharing the fruit with Adam and harking the sentence from God, who now appears as a green bearded elderly man descending from above. The story of Eve is the beginning of female suffering in human fate; the *Verve Bible*, therefore, continues with the narrations of those women who sought their destiny and salvation.

Ruth stands out among the other female stories, as Chagall dedicated five illustrations to this figure. The Book of Ruth and the Book of Esther are the only two books in the Old Testament named after a woman; however Chagall obviously paid more attention to the ordinary woman than the glorious queen. Starting from Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law who mourned her sons' deaths with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth's story carries on as she gleaned in Boaz's field and lay at his feet actively asking for his duty of a levirate marriage. Often

²²⁹ Gen35: 10 "And God said unto him, Thy name is Jacob: thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel."

interpreted as the feminist exegesis to the Torah, the Book of Ruth stands for brave women who fight for their own lives and happiness in a patriarchal society.

Consequently, the fact that Chagall focused on Ruth in the lithography set shows his sympathy toward this modern example of women who take initiative. The artist's rendering of the scenes concerning the interaction between Ruth and Boaz is worth discussing as well. With the brown backdrop of the cornfield, the lithography itself forms a pictorial narration beyond the letter of the text. With the dramatic gestures in "Meeting of Ruth and Boaz" it seems that the red-haired woman is trying to seize the man who, expressing amazement, displays a half-resisting and half-inviting gesture with both arms. A huge red circle, perhaps a distortion of the setting sun, is burning behind his back, which can be seen as a symbol for strong passion and desire behind this first meeting scene.

The play of colour is a clever device in this visual narration. In all of the illustrations in the *Verve Bible*, red functions as the main colour, especially in Ruth's story when sweating red overflows in "Ruth gleaning" (fig. IV-11), corresponding to Ruth's diligence in the cornfield. Red continues to dominate in the passionate "Meeting of Ruth and Boaz" (fig. IV-12), while the gentle silver-blue of the moon drips down the night that Ruth uncovers Boaz's feet and lies down with him (fig. IV-13). In the next scene "Boaz wakes up and sees Ruth at his feet" (fig. IV-14), Ruth's burning red hair mysteriously turns a calm blue and the giant red wheel in the "Meeting of Ruth and Boaz" also reduces as the gentle rising sun.²³⁰ Hope is now shining upon the future of Naomi and Ruth. This is Chagall's pictorial re-narration of a well-known story.

Despite the fact that the events are presented from the perspective of female characters, Chagall's biblical view does not vary much with the relationship between God and (wo)men. From the cover lithography of the *Verve Bible*, a design of blue-and-black colour tone, God appears magnificently in a diagonal gesture, overwhelming the figures of King David and Bathsheba, an example of a woman's power dominating a man. On the left of the cover design, a giant dove occupies most of the lithography, while a little goat (usually symbolizing Christ or the artist himself) and an abstract presentation of a pilgrim (echoing the theme of Jewish Diaspora again) are shown balancing the composition.

The belief that the relationship between God's power and man's fate is the artist's main concern is proved once again in the last two pieces on Job, in spite of those strong-willed women in-between. Occupying the whole composition, the solid figure of Job differs remarkably from those elongated women in a Blakean

²³⁰ Both characters are shown naked in the last picture, indicating that Chagall already asserted the two characters had physical contact that night. Even though the Bible does not mention it, it is not a new interpretation of the verse: "spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid" (Ruth 3: 9).

style as if it comes from another series of illustrations altogether. The sharp contrast between the image of Job and of other females could imply that it functions more as an allegory than a direct depiction of the biblical figure. The last pieces of Job, who is well-known of his steadfast faith and close relationship with God, correspond to the message about God and humanity in the beginning of the series.

7. Conclusion

The *Verve Bible*, together with other Bible-related works by Chagall, narrates stories independently from the original text. With references to the already-known stories, these coloured or black-and-white images are purposely juxtaposed and thereby encourage a new reading of the Bible. From *La Bible* to the *Verve Bible*, Chagall tried different alternatives to view and represent the original Hebrew text. It shows not only his personal concern and interest in the biblical world, but also the innovative way of re-narrating old stories within contemporary trends—in these cases, the turbulence of the political situation and the rise of feminine awareness.

Once again it is appropriate to examine *La Bible* from the perspective of the two categories of nostalgia. First, the journey to Palestine and the nearly faithful depiction of views of Jerusalem show Chagall's determination to represent the restored images of the biblical world. Second, the sense of longing and belonging to the heirs of "God's chosen people" is strongly reflected in the depictions based on and mixed with different religious traditions. All of the Jewish symbols, characters and regulations appear as a mysterious code which is only comprehensible to Jewish people. Moreover, the distinctive change in Chagall's drawing styles from the first and the second half of the illustrations indicates a shift in mind-set for the artist. This shift was motivated by the World Wars and the oppression suffered by the Jewish people, as well as by a reinforcement of the identification of being a Jew and the political ideal of reconstructing the homeland.

In fact, *La Bible* can be viewed as the most obvious demonstration of the concept of nostalgia. The nostalgic sense appears repeatedly and is depicted from different perspectives in Chagall's later artwork, including the female version of *Verve Bible*. The sense of nostalgia inspired by the holy land and the divine connection is a never-ending story.