



Marc Chagall's Jonah Drawings: The Bible as Picture Book

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The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard introduces a collection of Marc Chagall's biblical drawings as follows:

Creator of a whole universe of forms and colors, with his reds and ochres, dark or softly radiant blues, Marc Chagall reveals to us the very hues of man's lost Eden. Under his pencil and his brush the Bible becomes—quite naturally, in all simplicity—a picture book, an album of the portraits of one of the greatest families of mankind.¹

MARC CHAGALL AS BIBLICAL INTERPRETER

The Bible as picture book. For me, this brings to mind a Bible story book that my mother read to me in the evenings before I could read for myself. I can still visualize the scene: the green-blue couch, the ivory lamp with a three-way bulb (we were cautioned not to use the brightest option, to save on cost), the piano and rocking chair that sat opposite the couch. To this day, when I teach the Old Testament, I see the pictures in that book: Noah leading the animals into the ark two by two, Samson wrestling the lion, or David encountering Goliath.

The Bible as picture book. That's the way artist Marc Chagall understood it. And, beginning in 1930 when he received a commission from the French art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard to be involved in an extensive Bible project, he

¹Marc Chagall, *Drawings for the Bible* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960).

Marc Chagall makes the Bible a picture book. His Jonah drawings draw us deep into the biblical text.

produced a steady stream of illustrations from the Bible, in the form of paintings, ink drawings, sculptures, tapestries, and stained glass windows. This work continued through his lifetime and culminated in the dedication of the Biblical Message Museum in Nice, France, on the artist's eighty-sixth birthday, July 7, 1973.

"Chagall does not just illustrate the biblical texts. He offers an interpretation of them."

My first contact with Chagall's work was my encounter with the stained glass windows in the synagogue at the Hadassah hospital in Jerusalem in 1964. Since that time I have used colored slides of Chagall's work in teaching. One need only project *The Sacrifice of Isaac* or *The White Crucifixion* in front of a class and then ask, "What do you see here?" to spark a discussion that calls forth the imagination of an audience, whether they be Sunday School students or senior citizens.

Aside from the sheer beauty of the form and colors of the artist's work, that which has impressed me is the fact that Chagall does not just illustrate the biblical texts. He offers an interpretation of them. Time and again, after getting bogged down with learned studies that threaten to smother a biblical text under piles of form and redaction criticism, text, literary, and rhetorical criticism, I have returned to Chagall's works on my shelves and have been struck by the fact that his rendering of the text seems to be right on target.

MARC CHAGALL'S LIFE AND WORK

Marc Chagall was born in the city of Vitebsk in Russia, presumably on July 7, 1887, though there is some uncertainty about the exact date. The city at that time had thirty Christian churches and more than sixty synagogues. More than 40,000 of the 65,000 inhabitants were Jews. As one interpreter of Chagall puts it, "The world of east European Judaism, in which he was born and grew up, remained the fertile soil which gave rise to his artistic work. In his soul, he never really left Vitebsk."²

Marc was the oldest in a family with nine children, eight of whom survived. His father worked in a fish market on the Dvina river. This could explain all the figures of fish that appear in Chagall's works! The father's daily routine must have had influence on the young son. Chagall says in his autobiography,

Day after day, winter and summer, my father rose at six o'clock in the morning and went off to the synagogue....On his return, he prepared the samovar, had a drink of tea, and left for work. Hellish work, the work of a galley-slave.³

Chagall's Jewish education in his early years was intense. Vitebsk was a center for the Hasidic movement in Judaism. In his autobiography he reports, "Just imagine, every Saturday instead of going bathing in the river, my mother sent me to

²Rainer Sommer, *Marc Chagall als Maler der Bibel* (Wuppertal: R. Brockhaus, 1990) 6, my translation.

³Marc Chagall, *My Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 28.

study the Bible with [the rabbi].”⁴ In addition to the town of Vitebsk itself, the Hasidic atmosphere in which Chagall grew up had a great deal of influence on the artist’s view of the world and thus on his painting. The Jewish Museum volume, *Chagall and the Bible*, describes Vitebsk:

Inflecting this education was the pervasive atmosphere of Hasidism, which permeated Chagall’s home and community and provided the sustenance and foundation for his art. Hasidism, founded in the mid-18th century by the mystic Baal-Shem-Tov, sought a simple democratic Judaism based on genuine emotional faith rather than scholarship and formal observance of law and ritual. Appealing to a large segment of Eastern European Jewry, Hasidism defined true piety as man’s communion with God through fervent prayer and joy. The essential teachings of Hasidism asserted that God could be found everywhere and in everything, even in the simplest of material objects. This form of Judaism also held the Kabbalistic belief that man, through constant interaction with God, could influence God’s will. In lieu of dry erudition and the rote observance of ritual, Hasidism promoted worship imbued with religious ecstasy through song and movement. Through Hasidism, holiness could be discovered in the everyday, the weary and the poor.⁵

This Hasidic background explains the portrayal of many of the human figures appearing in Chagall’s works. The movement, the ecstasy, the joy that come through so many of the artist’s paintings seem very much like a visual illustration of the joyful themes that characterize Hasidism. In his definitive collection of Chagall’s works Franz Meyer tells of Hasidic Jews who

used to make themselves noticed by “throwing somersaults in the market place” and indulging in “all sorts of nonsense in public.” Does this not make us think of Chagall’s acrobats and circus artists?⁶

If the town of Vitebsk itself and the atmosphere of Hasidism were two of the sources of inspiration for Chagall’s work, an even greater source was the stories he had learned from the Hebrew Bible. Sommer writes:

Companions of his youth were not only his parents and grandparents, siblings and neighbors, but also the patriarchs and judges, Moses and the prophets, kings and priests. All these biblical figures were no less real to him than the people he encountered in his daily life.⁷

Chagall himself puts it this way:

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.⁸

⁴Ibid., 49.

⁵Jean Bloch Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible* (New York: Universe Books, 1987) 13.

⁶Franz Meyer, *Marc Chagall*, trans. Robert Allen (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1964) 15–16.

⁷Sommer, *Marc Chagall als Maler*, 11, my translation.

⁸Rosensaft, *Chagall and the Bible*, 10.

In addition to influences from his hometown, from Hasidism, and from the Bible, yet another source of inspiration for the artist's work should be mentioned. In 1931, after he had accepted the commission from Ambroise Vollard to embark on the Bible project, Chagall traveled to Palestine, Syria, and Egypt with his wife Bella and their daughter Ida. He wanted to see and touch and smell the land where the biblical writers lived. To quote again from *Chagall and the Bible*:

While in Palestine, Chagall often worked outdoors and absorbed details of the arid landscape and Bedouin figures that would enrich his etchings. He also renewed contact with the familiar face and body types of Vitebsk for his biblical figures through his encounters with the Yiddish-speaking, Russian-Jewish pioneers of Palestine. Most important however was his vivid sensation of a completely new and overwhelming light and sky.⁹

Chagall does not say much about his personal relationship to God in his autobiography. He does speak of a time when he was wrestling with the question of what to do next in his life:

But I felt that if I stayed in [Vitebsk] any longer, I should be covered with hair and moss. I roamed the streets, I searched and prayed. "God. Thou who hidest in the clouds, or behind the cobbler's house, lay bare my soul, the aching soul of a stammering boy, show me my way. I do not want to be like all the others; I want to see a new world....[Vitebsk], I'm forsaking you. Stay on your own with your herrings!"¹⁰

And the young artist did "see a new world." He left Vitebsk in 1907 to study art in St. Petersburg. He first went to Paris in 1910, settling more permanently there in 1923. He visited Berlin, Egypt, Palestine, Holland, Switzerland, Spain, Poland, Italy, the United States (1941–1946), finally settling in Vence, near Nice in southern France (1950), with further journeys to Israel and the United States, until his death in Vence in 1985.

THE JONAH DRAWINGS

We turn now to consider a series of Chagall's works concerned with the biblical story of Jonah.¹¹ I have quoted from Bachelard's essay at the beginning of this piece. A bit later in the same essay he writes:

And what a joy to meet with an artist who creates as rapidly as Chagall does!

⁹Ibid., 15.

¹⁰Chagall, *My Life*, 95.

¹¹These drawings are not easy to find. I have located them in three editions: (1) The edition that may claim priority is in a French art periodical: "Dessins pour la Bible," *Verve* 10/37–38 (1960), with an introduction by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard. There are ninety-six black and white drawings; the table of contents also lists twenty-four color lithographs, but they were not present in the volume I obtained. (2) An edition in English, *Drawings for the Bible*, cited in note 1 above. Again, the table of contents lists colored lithographs but they were not present in my volume. (3) *Drawings for the Bible* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995). This edition includes twenty-four color plates but does not include the essay by Bachelard. The drawings are reduced in size and are not as clearly reproduced as in the other two editions.

Rapid creation is the secret of creating forms that *live*. Life does not linger, stop to think. No preliminary sketches, always the first flash of inspiration—that is Chagall’s way. Thus in his cosmic scenes he is the painter of vivacity; there are no languors in his paradise and a thousand reveilles echo in his skies, dappled with happy birds in flight. The whole air is taking wing.



The first drawing illustrates the first scene in the book, where Jonah sets out to run away from the Lord (1:1–3).¹² We see Jonah’s face, looking at us. It is a bearded Jewish face, reminiscent of the faces Chagall saw and painted in Vitebsk. The wrinkled lines in the forehead appear to indicate anxiety. But why should Jonah be worried and anxious? The story tells us right away. Jonah was running away from God. The Lord commanded him to go northeast to Nineveh. But Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, the archenemy of Israel that had captured Samaria in 722 B.C.E. and deported the inhabitants. In listening to the words of the prophet Nahum we catch something of the attitude of those who had lived under the rule of Assyria:

Doomed is the lying, murderous city,
full of wealth to be looted and plundered!...
Nineveh the whore is being punished. (Nah 3:1, 4 TEV)

All those who hear the news of your destruction clap their hands for joy.
Did anyone escape your endless cruelty? (Nah 3:19 TEV)

¹²For discussion of the interpretation of the book of Jonah, see my commentaries: *Hosea-Micah* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) and *Jonah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993). The latter includes references to Jonah in works of art. For a consideration of Jonah as story, see the chapter, “Amazing Grace,” in James Limburg, *Old Stories for a New Time* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983). For a review of current Jonah studies, including some consideration of Jonah in art, see the new edition of Hans Walter Wolff’s classic *Studien zum Jonabuch*, with the added appendix by Jörg Jeremias (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2003).

Nineveh was a center for terrorism and violence. Go and preach to Nineveh? That would be like asking a Jew who had lost family in the Holocaust to undertake a mission to Germany immediately after World War II. No way, said Jonah, and immediately set out in precisely the opposite direction, heading southwest to Tarshish: "But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD" (Jonah 1:1–3). The phrase is repeated for emphasis, saying that Jonah was fleeing "away from the presence of the LORD." Look again at the drawing. Who wouldn't be anxious and worried, knowing that he or she was doing precisely the opposite of what the Lord had commanded?

And then of course there is the fish! It hardly appears as a monstrous whale but more like the sort of fish that the artist saw as he visited his father in the markets of his hometown.



The second drawing illustrates the second scene in the story, the storm at sea (Jonah 1:4–16). All appears as violence and chaos and darkness. The moon is barely visible at the upper right. The ship is out of control, one oar hanging loosely, one of the sailors frantically waving for help. And then we see Jonah, plunging into the depths, using his hands to swim for his life. He has been thrown overboard but the sea is still raging. There is no visible hope of rescue. Is the drowning Jonah calling for help (Jonah 2:1–2)? The fish, God's means of deliverance, is somewhere in the darkness.

The third drawing illustrates scene three, which tells of Jonah being swallowed by the fish, then praying to God from its belly (Jonah 1:17–2:10). Now everything is in motion. Jonah is sinking down into the water with only his legs visible. But this scene belongs to the fish. This time it is a very large fish, who appears to be



smiling. And Jonah is now cuddled up safely inside the creature. Clearly the fish here is not a fearsome sea monster, but as in the biblical story, a means of rescue. We reflect on the scene and ask, “How did that fish just happen to be at this place at this time?” Again, the answer is given in the story: “But the LORD provided a large fish to swallow Jonah...” (1:17). The Lord is not portrayed. But the Lord’s provided means of rescue is.

The fourth drawing is an extension of the third, still providing an illustration



of scene three. Now the sea has calmed down. The storm has ceased. It appears that a gentle rain is falling. And Jonah is relaxed, lying back and enjoying the ride. The fish appears to be glancing back at the passenger. According to the biblical story, the runaway is now singing, from inside the fish (Jonah 2:1–9). The poet Aldous Huxley has caught the mood with good humor, with lines that could provide a caption for this drawing:

Seated upon the convex mound
Of one vast kidney, Jonah prays
And sings his canticles and hymns.
Making the hollow vault resound
God's goodness and mysterious ways,
Till the great fish spouts music as he swims.¹³



The fifth sketch illustrates 2:10, “Then the LORD spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land.” Now the artist has lightened up the mood with a trio of seagulls added to the scene. The sea is calm. The fish has flipped over on her back and is disgorging her prophetic cargo. Jonah’s eye is aimed toward the east, toward the sun, and his hand is outstretched, as if to take on whatever task may await him. This does not look like a person running away to Tarshish in the west, but rather one whose life has now found its direction.

The last drawing in the series illustrates the fourth scene (Jonah 3:1–3a), which reports that the prophet is given his task a second time: “The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, ‘Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city,

¹³Aldous Huxley, “Jonah,” in *The Cherry Tree: A Collection of Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (New York: Vanguard, 1959) 211.



and proclaim to it the message that I tell you” (3:1–2). Now the drawing shows Jonah on the way toward Nineveh. Jonah’s hand holds his walking staff as he heads down the road leading to the city. Now there are no anxious lines on the prophet’s face, as was the case in the first drawing. We might even say that his face is glowing. And up above, the sun—or is that God?—is smiling. Jonah has found his purpose in life. He is carrying out the mission God has given him. And he looks happy. The final picture points us to the end of the story, to find out what happens to Nineveh. We discover that the king and people repent and the destruction is called off. And we learn something about God, who speaks to Jonah in a final question concluding the book:

And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle? (Jonah 4:11 RSV)

God, says the story, cares about the cows grazing on the hillsides of Assyria. To apply the “minor to major” rabbinic argument: If God cares about the cows of Nineveh, don’t you think God cares about you? Jesus once expressed a similar idea, though he spoke about sparrows instead of cows:

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. (Matt 10:29–31)

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR ME?

What do these drawings have to say to us? More precisely, what aspect of “the biblical message” (Chagall’s name for his biblical museum in Nice) do these draw-

ings help us to understand? First, the God of storm and sky attends to individuals; the anxious face of Jonah running away from his God-given task shows us that. Second, there may be storms and chaos along life's way, and we might feel as if we are in way over our heads, drowning in misery and troubles. But the God of the Jonah story is a loving God who cares. In Jonah's desperate situation, God responded

*"any God who cares even about the cows on the Assyrian hillsides
might give those people—and us—a second chance"*

to the prophet's call for help (2:2), acting to rescue him from the storm and the chaos. Who knows (3:9)? When we are swamped with stresses and sorrows, God might respond to our calls for help and rescue us! Finally, God forgives the one who has missed his vocation and gives that one a second chance. Could we call Jonah a "second career" prophet since he didn't follow the call the first time around? In any case, on the second time around Jonah picked up his walking stick and set out to carry out the task at hand, the mission God gave him in the first place. He is going to Nineveh "that great city" to call them to repentance. Who knows? Any God who cares even about the cows on the Assyrian hillsides might give those people—and us—a second chance.¹⁴

THE BIBLE AS PICTURE BOOK

During a recent sabbatical year in Germany, my wife and I had occasion to visit a good number of cathedrals, museums, and sculpture sites. We were ever on the alert for representations of biblical themes, especially of the Jonah story. I remember hearing a guide in the great cathedral in Cologne, Germany, telling how the stained glass windows had functioned: a priest or teacher in the congregation would direct a group to each window, point to the individual panels and offer an explanation. Thus these windows were not just objects of beauty but also served a pedagogical purpose.

As I page through art books collecting the biblical pictures of Marc Chagall, I am reminded of some lines from G. K. Chesterton:

Read all the pedants' screeds and strictures,
But don't believe in anything
That can't be told in colored pictures.¹⁵

¹⁴On the theme of the artist as interpreter, see my article, "Jonah and the Whale through the Eyes of Artists," *Bible Review* 6 (August 1990), which includes colored reproductions of paintings, sculptures, and stained glass windows; I also supplied the artwork on Jonah for David L. Miller, "Living the Mystery," *The Lutheran* (April 1999).

Among recent publications that consider Jonah and art, in addition to the work by Jeremias cited in note 12 above, see Yvonne Sherwood, *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). This is an excellent and even amazing presentation of the cultural influence of the Jonah story, including some consideration and reproductions of artwork.

¹⁵Maisie Ward, *Return to Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952). Thanks to Lisa Buck and Dale Ahlquist, president of the American Chesterton Society, for helping me to locate the source of this quotation.

Colored pictures of biblical themes—that’s what Marc Chagall spent a lifetime producing.

The great German preacher and theologian Helmut Thielecke once wrote a book on the parables that appeared in English as *The Waiting Father*. The original German title, however, was *Das Bilderbuch Gottes* (“God’s Picture Book”), referring to the parables as pictures illuminating Jesus’ preaching. Thielecke thought of at least part of the Bible as a “picture book.”

We build few cathedrals with massive stained glass windows in our time. But with our technology utilizing colored slides and PowerPoint, we have the possibility of bringing paintings and stained glass windows into our own teaching and preaching spaces. If one of our tasks today is to learn to “read the Bible again for the first time” (Marcus Borg’s formulation), I know of no better aid to that reading than what Marc Chagall has done with the pictures he finds in Scripture. ⊕

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