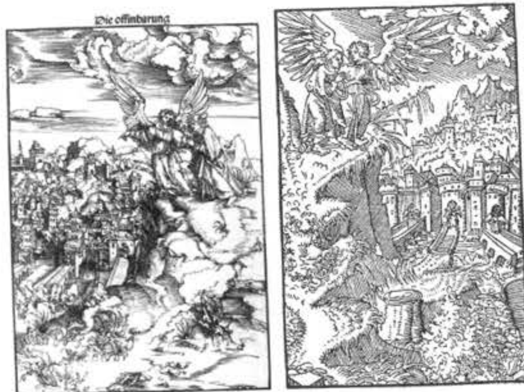
Fig. 20

Fig. 21



THE RECEPTION OF KING DAVID IN THE ART OF MARC CHAGALL

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> *The Bible has captured my imagination ever since I was a very young child. To me, it has always seemed the greatest source of poetry the world has ever known. Since then, I have sought its reflection in life and in art. The Bible is like a resonance of nature, and that secret is what I have tried to transmit.*[1]

These are the words of Marc Chagall relating his fascination with the Bible as a spiritual and creative resource for his own life and art. This paper pays particular attention, in the first part, to how Chagall establishes the biblical character of King David as a figure of peace through a visual accentuation of the signifiers, the harp and the donkey. Following on from that, in the second part, the less well-known artwork, David and Bathsheba, will be explored in greater detail, drawing out its meaning potential.[2] My intention is to reveal how Chagall's deep immersion in the Hebrew Scriptures provided him with a broad canvas from which he drew in a naturally intertextual manner.

The Bible, most particularly the Hebrew Bible, was a polyvalent semiotic resource for Chagall, at a personal, spiritual and psychological level – as well as in terms of his public persona and life as a famous Jewish artist living and working in Europe before, during and after the Shoah. There is a seamless flow between the biblical texts concerning King David and the personal life of Marc Chagall, a twentieth-century Jew, a one-time

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[1] Jean-Michel Foray and Francoise Rossini-Paquet, *National Museum Message Biblique Marc Chagall* (Paris: Editions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2000), 5.
[2] Unfortunately, due to the prohibitive cost of reproducing copyrighted artworks in academic journals, only *David and Bathsheba* will be reproduced in this article. The reader is asked to please make recourse to the "wikiart" website, through links provided, in order to view the other Chagall artworks discussed in this text.

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displaced refugee, always a resident alien. Before turning to his art I offer the very briefest potted biographical history of the artist with the hope of contextualising the works that shall be considered in greater detail.

Marc Chagall's childhood was spent in a Jewish shtetl on the edge of Vitebsk, in what was then south-western Russia, now north-eastern Belarus.[3] Vitebsk was a solid, provincial military outpost of the vast Russian empire when Moshe Shagal was born there on 7 July 1887.[4] Its "tumbling silhouette" was characterised by a mix of Jewish and Christian spires, towers and onion-domes, announcing a long, mixed cultural heritage.[5] Indeed, the baroque green and white Uspensky Cathedral that crowns the city skyline features in numerous of his paintings.[6]

Moshe was the eldest of nine children in a large extended family, deeply immersed in the rituals of Chassidic village life, iconic aspects of which imbue his art. Chagall left home for the first time in his late teens to travel to St. Petersburg and embark on his formal art education. And so commenced a long period of travel, during which time he lived in various European cities, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, building his reputation as an artist whilst avoiding wars, pogroms and revolutions.

Having married Bella Rosenfeld, his long-time romantic interest, whom he had known since childhood, the couple moved from Moscow to Paris in 1923.[7] For almost two decades his development as an artist flourished in Paris and his reputation was sealed with exhibitions as far afield as New York. During this period, he and his art dealer Vollard made plans to publish an illustrated Old Testament. This precipitated a two month sojourn in Palestine. Of this time, Chagall later stated, "In the East I found the Bible and part of my own being".[8] The biographer Wullschlager

[3] Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and the Lost Jewish World: the Nature of Chagall's Art and Iconography* (New York: Rizzoli, 2006), 23.
[4] Jackie Wullschlager, *Chagall: Love and Exile* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 147, records that in 1911, "from his arrival in Paris he used Marc". Chagall is a 'frenchified' version of Shagal.
[5] Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 9.
[6] An example is Chagall, "The House in Grey" (1917), now in the Museo Thyssen Bornemisza, Madrid.
[7] Bella was famously immortalised as Chagall's muse in his homage to their early married life: "Bella with White Collar"; see: https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/bella-with-white-collar-1917. A photo of Marc and Bella may be seen at http://www.roger-viollet.fr. Bella Rosenfeld was born on 2 December 1889, the last of nine children born to Shmuel Noah Rosenfeld and his wife Alta, née Levant. They were among the wealthiest Jews in Vitebsk and Shmuel Noah is noted as a "formidable Talmudic scholar, educated in a yeshiva, and a deeply religious man" of the Hasidic sect (cf. Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 91-2).
[8] Ibid., 349.

suggests that "What he was really searching for there was not external stimulus but an inner authorisation from the land of his ancestors, to plunge into his work on the Bible illustrations".[9] And plunge he did: between 1931 and 1934 he worked obsessively on the Bible. By 1939, at the beginning of World War II, he had completed half of the etchings for his projected work. However, Vollard died that same year and between these two significant events, the project was stalled until its final completion and publication in the mid fifties.

In 1941, following the collapse of France, the Chagalls, Marc, Bella and their adult daughter Ida, were among those fortunate enough to escape Europe with the assistance of Varian Fry and Hiram (Harry) Bingham IV (the American Vice-Consul in Marseilles) - by boat to New York. This interval in the US marked a particularly painful period in Chagall's life. In September 1944 his beloved wife Bella died suddenly of a virus infection that could not be treated due to the wartime shortage of penicillin. Chagall was utterly devastated and in his grief, turned all his work-in-progress to face the wall and ceased painting for the best part of a year.

Their daughter, Ida, to whom he was very close, was already managing much of the business side of Chagall's affairs. Concerned for her father's wellbeing in his extreme grief, she engaged Virginia Haggard McNeil – a friend of a friend – to become a house-keeper and companion for her father, while she travelled to newly-liberated Paris to see about the possibility of an exhibition.[10] This arrangement continued after she returned but gradually developed into a romantic relationship – although initially hidden from Ida and her husband Michel.

Virginia Haggard was the young, twenty-nine year old wife of the Scottish painter John McNeil. She was of a patrician English background and fluent in French, her father Sir Godfrey Haggard, having been the British consul general in Paris. Biographer Jonathan Wilson writes of their affair:

> Kept secret from the world, if not Chagall's circle of friends, Virginia Haggard was first mentioned by a Chagall biographer in

[9] Ibid., 353.
[10] The Liberation of Paris was a military action that took place during World War II from 19 August 1944 until the German garrison surrendered the French capital on 25 August 1944, almost a month to the day before Bella suddenly died. Chagall perceived this as a cruel irony, that having safely brought his wife away from the threat of the Nazis she died just as the war was ending, from a trivial infection, in a foreign land.

1977, twenty five years after the end of their relationship. Virginia indeed lived with Chagall for seven years and they had a son together, but she was not allowed to attend the opening of Chagall's 1946 MOMA retrospective (Ida accompanied Chagall), and she frequently found herself in what, from the outside, appear to be untenable and humiliating situations.[11]

Wilson continues,

> Chagall's relationship with Virginia frequently highlights the painter's confused and sometimes guilt-ridden association to his own Jewishness and the complexities that attended his sense of himself as an emblematic artist for the Jewish community, a position that he both embraced and rejected. For example, Chagall was mortified when, despite precautions, Virginia became pregnant within a year of Bella's death. His inner disturbance stemmed neither from impending fatherhood nor the fact that Virginia was his mistress, but from anxiety over his contravention of Jewish law. According to Virginia, Chagall did not want it to get out that he had sired a child during the yearlong mourning period for Bella. He took steps to keep Virginia's pregnancy hidden, including a move to the secluded countryside, High Falls in the Catskill Mountains, where he bought a modest clapboard house.[12]

Having sequestered Virginia in the Catskills, Chagall travelled to postwar Paris on 23 May 1946 to join Ida (who had gone ahead on her second trip back to Paris) and plan for a major exhibition and his eventual return there. It was five weeks before Virginia was due to have their baby.[13] Marc Chagall's and Virginia Haggard McNeil's son was born on June 22, 1946, in the Bronx. He was named David – but carried the last name McNeil, as Virginia was not yet divorced from her husband.[14] "Chagall encouraged Virginia to convert to Judaism – a child is considered Jewish only through the maternal line – and she dutifully begged Adele Opatoshu for help. But Ida ridiculed the idea and the matter soon slipped."[15] The Jewish couple Joseph and Adele Opatoshu had been close friends of the Chagalls' for years and were the only people apart from Ida and her husband to know of the pregnancy. David was circumcised on June 29 in a ceremonial bris presided over by Joseph Opatoshu. Chagall did not return to the United States until late August.[16]

A poem Chagall wrote at this time was doubly addressed to "My Departed Love / My new-found Love".[17] The painting *The Soul of the City*, based on a 1940 self-portrait sketch, was completed in 1945 and expresses something of this inner conflict in his grief and devotion to Bella's memory and his burgeoning relationship with Virginia.[18] Tellingly for us, Chagall depicts himself *with two faces*, one turned towards his easel and a canvas featuring a crucifixion scene, the other towards the two women. The spirit of Bella, his beloved deceased wife, dives down in a wedding dress, with great force like a huge white flame, but she is turned away from him; Virginia, an earthly, brown-haired woman, sits close beside him cradling a cockerel. The gloomy, recessed background is a rendering of Vitebsk. The dynamism and glowing white of Bella's spiralling bridal train dominates the image.[19] Within this painting lies, I suggest, a hermeneutical key to Chagall's acutely perceived and personal reception of King David, eleven years later, in the lithograph *David and Bathsheba*.

Marc and Virginia's relationship lasted about seven years. Together they left the US and returned to France. This relationship, even after it ended, was largely kept secret within the Chagall family until the late seventies, when Virginia's memoir was published. Until recently biographies have had very little to say about this relationship.

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[11] Jonathan Wilson, *Marc Chagall*, Jewish Encounters (New York: Schocken, 2007), 152-3. This included things like Marc and Ida speaking Yiddish to one another, as had always been their familial custom when Bella was alive, but in the awareness that Virginia did not understand Yiddish and was therefore excluded. Chagall occasionally joked about her "goyishness" or her being a "goy" - Yiddish slang for "a gentile".

[12] Wilson, *Marc Chagall*, 153-4.

[13] Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 436.

[14] John McNeil, now estranged from his wife, Virginia Haggard McNeil, for almost two years, agreed to this being recorded on David's birth certificate. David (Chagall) McNeil grew up in France but spent his childhood at boarding school in Versailles with infrequent summer holidays with his father in Vence, after the end of his parents' relationship. At Chagall's funeral in 1985, by which time he was almost 40, he was "not allowed to sit with the rest of the family members" (Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 522). When Ida Chagall died almost a decade later, her obituary in the *New York Times* described her as the "only child" of Marc Chagall, proof of how David McNeil, Chagall's second child and only son (and, ironically, born in New York), had been kept firmly in the shadows and off the record (cf. http://www.nytimes.com/1994/08/12/obituaries/chagall-s-daughter-dies.html).

[15] Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 434.

[16] Wilson, *Marc Chagall*, 156.

[17] Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 431; according to Virginia, Chagall told her, "it was Bella who sent you to look after me. Rembrandt had his Hendrickje Stoffels to console him after Saskia's death; I have you" (p. 428).

[18] See https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/the-soul-of-the-city-1945.

[19] Wullschlager, *Chagall*, 431.

Valentina Brodsky, a Russian-Jewish milliner living in London, was headhunted by Ida Chagall, his daughter, to be Chagall's personal assistant and within a short period became his wife, in the summer of 1952. It is to her that his *Song of Songs* cycle of paintings is dedicated.

This latter third of Chagall's life is marked by great stability in all areas of his life. His greatest concern becomes his enduring competitions with Picasso and Matisse, both of whom lived nearby and both of whom he outlived. His output remained prodigious well into his nineties and he became the first living artist in France to have a museum dedicated exclusively to his work. Moreover, he personally oversaw many aspects of its design and layout, including the dedicated room for the *Song of Songs* paintings. The Musée National Marc Chagall in Nice contains a superb selection of his biblical paintings that he bequeathed to the state of France.

I turn now to glance briefly at a few works in order to draw out some salient aspects of Chagall's graphic characterisation of King David.

The Characterisation of David in the art of Marc Chagall

Chagall's reception of King David over sixty or more different designs and artworks, drawings, etchings, lithographs, watercolours, oil paintings and indeed, a stone sculpture, overwhelmingly favour a depiction of David as the harpist, the musician.[20] In fact, and I think this is highly significant, I have come across only three artworks featuring David as a warrior, in battle, or to be more precise holding a weapon of war, his sword, and the head of Goliath.[21] These each appear in both black-and-white and

[20] Examples include *Le roi David* (https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/king-david-1951), *Le roi David* (https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/king-david-1973), *Le roi David* (https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/king-david-1974).

[21] The etchings; *Victoire de David sur Goliath,* 1952-1956 (MBMC 335), and *David, portent la tête de Goliath, se présente devant Saül, 1952-1956* (MBMC 336), and the lithograph *David,* 1956 (MBMC 396), *Musée National Message Biblique Marc Chagall Nice: Catalogue des Collections*, 2nd edition (Réunion des Musées Nationaux: Paris, 2001), 201, 220. The first two belong to the *Bible* project of etchings, illustrating the Bible, begun with Vollard in Paris before World War II; see https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/david-s-victory-over-goliath-i-samuel-xvii-48-51 and https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/david-with-the-head-of-goliath-comes-to-saul-i-samuel-xvii-55-58. A gouache painting, *David et Goliath*, similar to the black and white lithograph may be viewed at http://www.masterart.com/Marc-Chagall-1887-1985-David-Goliath-PortalDefault. aspx? tabid=53&dealerID=29526&objectID=736100. The lithograph, *David with the Head of Goliath*, may be viewed at https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/David-with-the-Head-of-Goliath/7355533CEB286B5C.

colour iterations, making a total of six artworks. Despite the fact that Chagall made etchings and lithographs portraying many other episodes in the David story, including David before Saul, David and Absalom, and David mourning the death of Absalom, he consistently chose to depict David as a harper.

An etching entitled *Having Heard About The Death Of Jonathan, His Closest Friend, Which Had Been Killed In Battle Against The Philistines, David Cries And Sings A Mournful Song* (2 Sam 1:17-27) perhaps best shows the characteristics of David consistently found in Chagall's artwork.[22] Chagall presents David most often in profile, and most often facing right, wearing a long robe, usually regally red in colour. Sometimes the robe is richly decorated and the colour is highly saturated.

An exception would be the late 1967 painting *David in Blue* in which King David floats above a city and a multitude playing his harp, here his robe has splashes of colour like a bouquet; red, pink, gold and green.[23] David always has a beard, the colour of which varies considerably across artworks from a more natural brown to green and even a bright purple colour.[24] David always wears a crown and almost invariably carries and plays a lyre. Both the crown and the lyre are usually golden in colour. Chagall makes use of colour to clearly connect David's kingship with his playing of the lyre, with music making.

In the biblical account, the first characterisation of David is as a shepherd (1 Sam 16:11, 17; 17:15) followed by that of a harper in 1 Sam 16 (16:16, 23), when he is sought to soothe King Saul with his lyre-playing. Carole Fontaine notes:

> Commentators reflect primarily on the musical introduction of David in two ways, linking it to the apotropaic use of music against demons, or its relationship to ecstatic prophecy.[25]

[22] See *Ayant appris la mort de Jonathan, son ami le plus cher, tué dans le combat contre les Philistins, David le pleure et chante un cantique funèbre (II Samuel, I,17-27)*: https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/having-heard-the-death-of-jonathan-that-his-dearest-friend-has-been-killed-in-battle-against.

[23] See http://www.effettoarte.com/?attachment_id=4329.

[24] See *David à la harpe*: https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/david-with-his-harp-1956.

[25] Carole R. Fontaine, "The Sharper Harper (1 Samuel 16:14–23): Iconographic Reflections on David's Rise to Power", in *The Fate of King David, The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon.* The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, ed. Tod Linafelt, Timothy Beal and Claudia Camp (New York: T &T Clark, 2010), 135-52, at 137.

The Hebrew word *kinnôr* is used to describe David's lyre. One scholar (with a special interest in ancient musical instruments), Bo Lawergren, maintains this is a West Semitic term which probably refers to the so-called "thin" lyre which is thought to have originated in Syria around 2500 B.C.E.[26] Fontaine writes,

> The use of the *kinnôr* in prophetic, oracular contexts is attested throughout the Hebrew Bible, in contexts far and wide, along with other musical instruments. In late texts, we hear about the use of the *kinnôr* for musical accompaniment to stimulate or convey prophecy (1 Chr 25:3). Likewise, in military encounters the use of singers to inspire a shift in power from one side to the other occurs in 2 Kgs 3:13-20 and 2 Chr 20:14-23.[27]

Fig. 1. *The Standard of Ur*, 3/4: Left view (2500 BCE, excavated 1928 CE). © The British Museum Trust.

[26] Bo Lawergren, "Distinctions Among Canaanite, Philistine, and Israelite Lyres, and Their Global Lyrical Contexts", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 309 (1998) 41–68.
[27] Fontaine, "The Sharper Harper", 140. Further references to Miriam's victory song (Ex 15:20-21), Moses's song (Dt 31:19-22).

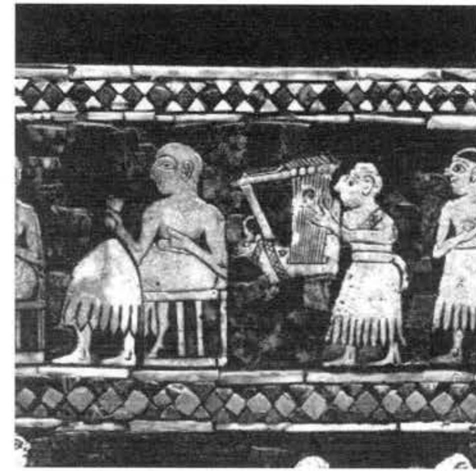

Fig. 2. *The Standard of Ur*, detail of harper playing a Bull lyre. © The British Museum Trust.

The reception tradition of David and his harp is, of course, also enshrined in the book of Psalms, which attributes much of its content to the traditional authorship of David. Subsequent literary, hymnal, and visual interpretations of David's life are replete with the image of the king with his harp, recalling the days of his less ambiguous relationship to God.

Fontaine makes an interesting point in relation to the role of the harper in other mosaics and reliefs of the Ancient Near East, referring in this instance to the *Standard of Ur (*fig. 1), now in the British Museum.[28] There is a "war" side and a "peace" side to this trapezoid. On the "Peace" side in the top register – the procession: soldiers and prisoners of war, bulls, sheep, onagers, goats, and bearers with great sacks of the booty of war finally end their procession before a row of seated dignitaries – behind whom is a harper playing a Bull lyre (fig. 2).[29] She writes:

> It is clear from relationship between the two sides of the standard that the transitions between War and Peace are accompanied by music made on strings. The harper is a distinctive part of the Peace scene, for his appearance demarcates the shift from

[28] See http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=12550001& objectId=368264& partId= 1.
[29] Fontaine, "The Sharper Harper", 143. A prototype of the Bull lyre was also excavated at the same scene as the Royal Standard of Ur and reconstructed. See James B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 61, plate 183; 64, plate 205.

> procession to feast, from prisoners to captors. The warrior king, who was presented with prisoners in the war tableau, is now feted with music. A 'new space' that enforces orderly processions and tunes upon the former chaos of war is created for the group who listen to the lyrical denouement of battle. We should not be surprised, then, that more than a millennium later, the Assyrian Empire takes special care to keep harpers alive, and sends them into exile along with their instruments, even giving us a picture of the harpers of Lachish exiled with their lyres. To the victors go the tunes.[30]

This connection of the harp as an instrument-of-peace that signals the end of war and the transition to "peacetime" is a constitutive dimension of Chagall's repetitive and almost exclusive portrayal of David with a harp. In the context of Europe after the Holocaust, there is something of a profound desire for peace for the Jewish people in Chagall's characterisation of the biblical messianic figure of King David as a harpist. Perhaps the avenging warrior-king was too remote and painful a prospect, redundant even – in the face of such devastation of one's people – for a war-weary Jew.

The musical aspect of David's character is linked to the composition of the laments and psalms and his communication with God. In this sense, David, has a distinct 'mediator' role between the Jews and the God of Israel, both past and present, in Chagall's characterisation of David as harper.

David and the Donkey

David and Bathsheba is a recurrent theme in Chagall's work, after his return to France. The portrayal of King David as lover resurfaces right up to his late *Song of Songs* cycle dedicated to his second wife, Valentina Brodsky,[31] affectionately known as "Vava".

Before turning to consider the figures of David and Bathsheba in these images, I wish to consider briefly their relationship to their given title and implied subject as a series dealing with the *Song of Songs*. It was Chagall himself who identified the primary couple in the paintings as David and Bathsheba.[32] This is clearly at variance with the biblical text, which is

[30] Fontaine, "The Sharper Harper", 143.
[31] Foray and Rossini-Paquet, *Chagall*, 73–5.
[32] Ibid., 73, 88.

attributed to David's son Solomon. Bathsheba is mentioned in the text but she is certainly not the Shulamite (Song 3:11).

The cycle of paintings is not an illustration of the chapters of the *Song of Songs*. They are a visual reception of the *Song of Songs* through the prism of the long life and loves of one man. Chana and Ariel Bloch in their commentary (on the *Song of Songs*) describe this genre:

> Similes and metaphors from nature alternate with images from art and architecture in the four formal set-pieces where the lovers single out for praise the parts of each other's bodies; these poems belong to a genre often referred to by the Arabic term *waṣf*. The images are not literally descriptive; what they convey is the delight of the lover in contemplating the beloved, finding in the body reflected images of the world in its freshness and splendor.[33]

Perhaps the best approach is to consider these large oils as *waṣfs* in paint. The five compositions are connected through a chromatic palette of predominant hues of reds, mauves and pinks that fill the background of each canvas. Each painting is replete with motifs that have populated all of Chagall's work: couples reclining and embracing; female nudes, doves, angels, abundant foliage, and animals such as roosters and goats. Many of the paintings feature more than one embracing couple.[34] Imaged in keeping with Chagall's style, a visible representation of King David appears in each painting. Each painting abounds in Davidic symbolism: the tower of David, the city of David, Jerusalem, the throne of David and the star of David. In what is perhaps the best known of the series, David and Bathsheba reclining on the back of a mythical winged donkey-like creature fly over the southern French, medieval walled-city of Vence (Chagall's Jerusalem).[35] Two other paintings feature a donkey wearing a crown.[36] His crowned donkey is arguably a Chagallian motif for David.

In the ancient Middle Eastern world, leaders rode horses if they rode to war, but donkeys if they came in peace. Zechariah prophesies that the

[33] Chana Bloch and Ariel Bloch, *The Song of Songs, The World's First Great Love Poem* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 15.
[34] Commentators suggest that this refers to Chagall's first love Bella. Foray and Rossini-Paquet, *Chagall*, 78.
[35] A late preparatory study of which may be seen at https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/study-to-song-of-songs-iv-1958-4.
[36] See *Le Cantique des Cantiques III* at https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/song-of-songs-iii-1960-6 and *Le Cantique des Cantiques V* at https://www.wikiart.org/en/marc-chagall/song-of-songs-v-9.

Messiah will ride into Jerusalem "victorious, triumphant, yet humble, riding on an ass, on a donkey foaled by a she-ass"; seated upon the symbol of peace and humility, "he shall banish chariots from Ephraim and horses from Jerusalem" (Zech 9:9-10). The Talmud states that "he who sees an ass in a dream may hope for salvation" (Berakhot 56b).[37] At David's insistence Solomon is anointed as King on David's own donkey (1 Kgs 1:33).

Furthermore, the Torah applies similar rules to the wild ass and the resident alien, who lived among the Israelite people with an ambiguous status, entitled to some of the same rights but excluded from others. For instance, both the donkey and the resident alien were to rest on the Sabbath. Both were forbidden intimate contact with the Israelites: the donkey could not plow yoked to an Israelite herd animal; the resident alien could not marry an Israelite (Ex 23:12).[38] Chagall very much understood himself as the resident alien, wherever he lived, throughout his adult life. In Chagall's reception and appropriation of David, the donkey serves as a complex reception and appropriation of David, the donkey serves as a double motif – signifying simultaneously both the biblical messianic David and his own self-understanding as a perpetual resident alien.

Apart from the early biblical illustrations of the 1930s Chagall only once, after World War II, depicts David with a sword holding the head of Goliath.[39] Beyond his own personal appropriation of King David, this abandoning of the warrior dimension is a development of Chagall's visual connotation of King David as a salvific figure of peace. The symbol of the crowned donkey is paired with the crowned harpist. Together they imbue David with spiritual leadership, in the sense of a peaceful approach toward others, and an approach to God.

A Semiotic Analysis of *David and Bathsheba* by Marc Chagall

I turn now to a deeper semiotic analysis of one particular artwork, *David and Bathsheba*. In the centre of this composition, Chagall has drawn an unusual head. It functions in a way not dissimilar to those classic perception images that we have all seen; that is at once a wrinkled, old woman's head or a profile of a young woman wearing an elaborate hat with

[37] For other instances of leaders riding donkeys see Jdg 5:10, 10:4, 12:14 and 2 Sam 16:2.

[38] In a reversal of this, Chagall the Jew, is the 'resident alien' who lives his adult life in predominantly gentile social environments, be they European or American. His unwillingness to marry Virginia Haggard may also be rooted in this self-understanding.

[39] The lithograph, *David with the Head of Goliath,* at https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/David-with-the-Head-of-Goliath/7355533CEB286B5C.

a feather (fig. 3). The rabbit and the duck is another example. Some people manage to see one or the other automatically but when the other is pointed out, they cannot return to the previous perception. A few are able to simultaneously hold both or switch quickly between both with ease.

The double-headed or two-faced figure has a precedent in religious and art history, examples being found in ancient cultures including the Mayans, and popping up in other contemporary manifestations such as this photograph (fig. 4).

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

In *David and Bathsheba* (fig. 5), we are presented with a two-faced head that simultaneously displays to us the face of a man on the left and that of a woman on the right. These two faces are obviously intended to represent to us, as reiterated in the title, the couple David and Bathsheba (2 Sam 11).

David's face on the left may be seen to simultaneously face the viewer and also to be in profile facing out to the left – but casting a furtive, sideways glance at the viewer. The bridge of the nose, lips, moustache and beard are detectable. However, the eye of David is so pronounced as to make it difficult to sustain the profile view.

Fig. 5: Marc Chagall, David et Bethsabée, 1956, lithograph.[40]

[40] © Musée national Marc Chagall.

The juxtaposition of these two faces is a powerful semiotic device that is suggestive of many things. Perhaps they are 'of one mind'? Perhaps it implies that they share a responsibility in the deeds (adultery and conspiracy to murder) that have been committed, that Bathsheba is culpable with David? This interpretation, now discredited by most scholars, was prevalent in some older biblical commentaries.[41] However, there is not an exact equivalence in the two-facedness of this image. While David's face is seen in two perspectives, profile and forward facing, Bathsheba's face is seen only in profile. It is not possible to perceive her as looking forward at the viewer. She does not engage the viewer in a frontal gaze. In this artwork we have the intriguing juxtaposition of both a demand and an offer. The frontal gaze of the eye of David at the implied viewer makes a demand of the viewer. It requires an engagement from the viewer. It is hard to ignore, to look away, or not to keep coming back to David's gaze. And it is David's gaze that is so central to this narrative. The focal point of the artwork, David's gaze is also the pivot around which the biblical narrative turns.

The viewer is also placed in close proximity to David and Bathsheba. We are within what is referred to as an intimate distance, where the head and shoulders only are visible to us and the head takes up about a third of the picture plane. This further implicates us in an emotional relationship with David and Bathsheba, but with David particularly, as it is with David that we have direct eye-level contact. The frontal angle of David's face involves the viewer in his emotional state. The oblique angle with which we see Bathsheba's face implies our emotional detachment from her. We are positioned semiotically to relate emotionally to David and possibly to collude with him in the observation of Bathsheba. This semiotic siting of the viewer is precisely what J. Cheryl Exum has pointed to in her incisive work on the operation of the male gaze in this text and how the

[41] See Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel, A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1964); see also George Nicol in "Bathsheba, a Clever Woman?", *Expository Times* 99 (1988) 360-3, where he suggests: "It cannot be doubted that Bathsheba's action in bathing so close to the king's residence was provocative, nor can the possibility that the provocation was deliberate be discounted. Even if it was not deliberate, Bathsheba's bathing in a place so clearly open to the king's palace can hardly indicate less than a contributory negligence on her part" (p. 360); in "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative", *JSOT* 73 (1997) 43–54, he writes that Bathsheba is a "clever and resourceful woman who in marrying David evidently achieves her goal" (p. 53). J. Cheryl Exum has explored sexist readings of the David and Bathsheba episode at length in *Plotted, Shot and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, 2nd revised edition (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 27-59.

male-gaze has been transferred to visual art of this narrative; be it paintings or film.[42] Exum asks,

> Why is it that (male) interpreters are so quick to blame Bathsheba for appearing on the scene in some state of undress? What about the responsibility of the narrator, who made the decision to portray her in the act of washing? It is, after all, the biblical narrator who, using David as his agent, makes Bathsheba the object of the male gaze. When biblical commentators imply that Bathsheba desired the king's attentions and when popular renditions of the story attribute such motivation to her, they let the narrator off the hook at the woman's expense. We are also involved in the narrator's pretense. By introducing Bathsheba to us through David's eyes, the biblical narrator puts us in the position of voyeurs: "…he saw from the roof a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful" (2 Sam 11.2). [] The narrator controls our gaze; we cannot look away from the bathing beauty but must consider her appearance 'very beautiful'. We presume she is naked or only partially clad and thinking about it requires us to invade her privacy by undressing or dressing her mentally. The intimacy of washing is intensified by the fact that this is a ritual purification.… Nor are we and David the only voyeurs: "Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?" (v. 3). It is not clear who says these words, whether David or an attendant, but, in any event "Is this not Bathsheba?" suggests that someone else is watching too. The woman is focalised through the male gaze.[43]

Bathsheba is the one gazed upon, the woman who caught David's eye. And now, as viewers of this image, we too participate again in the gazing upon Bathsheba. The viewer finds him or herself held in the gaze of David – as Bathsheba found herself held in the gaze of David. And here, the viewer gazes on the profile of the face of Bathsheba. We are caught midway in a triad between David and Bathsheba. The viewer is positioned almost as a mirror: both gazed upon by David and gazing with David at the beautiful Bathsheba.

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[42] Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted,* 33–4.
[43] Ibid., 34.

There is much happening around the two-faced head; firstly, directly above David is the figure of a prophet. This figure is consistent with how Chagall represents prophets, most especially Jeremiah, throughout his work; they are curved in towards themselves and holding or reading a torah scroll. This is one of the symbols of the Hebrew Bible, almost like an archetype, that reappear consistently throughout Chagall's work. This curved body language speaks of a turning inwards, a contemplative disposition. The prophet and his words are on David's mind. Who is the prophet? There are two that feature prominently in David's life – Samuel and Nathan. Is it the prophet who anointed him for his sacred role as king (1 Sam 16:13) or is it the prophet who knows what he has done and comes to challenge him about his behaviour and pronounce a curse on his house (2 Sam 12:1-15)? The latter – Nathan – seems likely. In his body language, Nathan is also turned away from David, suggestive of moral rejection or condemnation. The prophet points back to God. He is coloured in a celestial blue with four gold circles in the blue of his garment.[44]

Sweeping in dramatically, from the right, bypassing Bathsheba, flies an angel with arms outstretched. The angel is a bright, vibrant reddy-orange and gold, with some pink and a gold-tipped wing. At the left of David is another possibly angelic figure looking at David and gesturing towards him. This might be an angel, whispering in his ear, representing his conscience? Or, it could possibly be interpreted as the ghost of Uriah haunting David, who has literally come between Uriah and Bathsheba.[45] The former is more likely as it is visually consistent with Chagall's angels across other works. In the distance behind the prophet and the angel, a town or village is suggested in the outline of buildings. These are too vague to assign any particular description such as 'castle' or 'balcony', for example; however, they may simply allude to the city of David – Jerusalem.

Four times in the Books of Samuel David is complimented as being "like an angel of God" or having the wisdom of "an angel of God" (1 Sam 29:9; 2 Sam 14:17; 14:20; 19:27). However, there is a more sinister episode involving an angel reported in 2 Sam 24:16-17:

> But when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented concerning the evil, and said

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[44] I have not come across a significant allusion to the number four, four gold stars, for example, in relation to Nathan to point to what these may signify. As gold alludes to the sacred and is only elsewhere here in this artwork, seen in the divine envoy, the angel's gold-tipped wing and body – probably signifies Nathan's holiness as God's appointed prophet.
[45] There is a precedent for communication from the spirits of the dead in the Davidic narrative in the "Witch of Endor" episode (1 Sam 28:7-19).

> to the angel who was bringing destruction among the people, "It is enough; now stay your hand". The angel of the Lord was then by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. When David saw the angel who was destroying the people, he said to the Lord, "I alone have sinned, and I alone have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house".

As this image so evidently deals with the internal moral conflict experienced by David, in Chagall's reception of this narrative, this angel is that of the text above, stretching out its hand to destroy Jerusalem. That particular passage relates to the census but has been transposed by Chagall in this way here. David's response to God is to acknowledge that he alone had sinned. The angel sweeps, in violent, fiery red, past Bathsheba towards David; he comes from the realm of the sacred towards David. The angel operates as a dynamic and powerful vector that links God and David as it mediates God's message, moving in from the divine position in the top right corner towards David - from the invisible actor, God, to the goal, David.

Below David and the angel, on the left, is a rather violent, confused scratchy mark. Below the face of Bathsheba, on the right, is the hand of David strumming the strings of his signifying harp. There is no account in the text of David playing the harp for Bathsheba even when he is comforting her after the death of their first child (2 Sam 12:24). Rather, it is in response to God's messages, those of the prophet and the angel, that David plays his harp. And in doing so, he may be said to bring us 'full-circle' to another text attributed to David and concerning a confession of his guilt in relation to Bathsheba: Ps 51. The superscription describes it as "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba". Two early lines from this psalm (Ps 51:3-4) both allude to sight in some way, whether it is an internal "vision of conscience" or the imagined "sight" of God:

> For I know my transgressions,
> and my sin is **ever before me.**
> Against you, you alone, have I sinned,
> and done what is evil in **your sight**…

This artwork works effectively then as a visual reception not only of the David and Bathsheba narrative of 2 Sam 11, but also of Ps 51. Christopher Heard reminds us that acceptance of the superscription's

invitation is a hermeneutical choice not a historical one. He argues: "However the narrative headings originated they suggest that a 'biographical' reading of the psalms should prove to be hermeneutically fruitful even if historically barren".[46] It is precisely this type of intertextuality that Chagall has achieved with this intriguing artwork.

This composition places the fraught emotional relationship between David and Bathsheba front and centre. Within that David's eye is given the greatest salience. It is the captivating focal point. He is framed on the right by Bathsheba and above by the prophet, both of whom turn away from him. On the left an angel (or a ghost) whispers in his ear. Bathsheba is framed by the angel sweeping past her. All around her is David; she is almost contained within David, his thoughts, his face, his arm, his harp, his music-making. This is a circular composition with a counter-clockwise directionality, that is given momentum by the angel's dramatic entry on the right and proceeds around, through the tumbling prophet, down the vertical angel on the left, around the circular scratches and up through the curves of David's fingers and the diagonal strings of the harp. These strong diagonals are pointing back up to the top right-hand-corner, the realm of the divine whence the angel emerges. There is a direct correlation and visual echo in the posture and gesture of the hand of the prophet Nathan and the hand of David. Both point back to the top right, the sacred place of God, beyond the picture plane. David's playing of the harp is oriented towards God, in response to an inner acknowledgement of his sin in relation to Bathsheba, the pivot around which both the biblical narrative and this composition turns.

Chagall's reception of David in this work represents him as a profoundly conflicted man. His reception of Bathsheba conforms more closely with the text in that she has far less of a role. She is beautiful and passive, hemmed in on all sides by David's turbulent life and manipulations. Chagall's reception of the narrative presents Bathsheba as a point of profound internal moral conflict for David. Yet the two faces are strikingly white and bright. They float in a murky soup of warm browns – the dense chromatic fog of David's emotional ruminations. Regret, guilt, and self-loathing emerge and recede along with ghostly figures and angry scratches, under the prophet's condemnation and the flashing angel's curse! Much as Saul had once needed David's harmonies to quiet his demons, so too David here reaches for his harp in the hope of finding his peace. And so I suggest that we return to Ps 51 and understand this lithograph as David's

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[46] R. Christopher Heard, "Penitent to a Fault: The Characterisation of David in Psalm 51", in Linafelt, Beal, Camp, *The Fate of King David*, 163-74, at 163.

prayer of contrition acutely rendered in paint: "turn away your face from my sins, and wipe away all my guilt", "purify me with hyssop till I am clean, wash me till I am whiter than snow" (Ps 51:9, 7).

Conclusion

The English theologian Ben Quash discussing his favourite poet, the 17th century Welshman Henry Vaughan, writes;

> Vaughan could let the world that the Bible described and imagined infuse the way he viewed and experienced his own rural landscape, so that whenever he looked at a grove of trees or a river he saw angels talking with patriarchs (Abraham discoursing and eating, Jacob wrestling, and Elijah being fed). To use his own language, he let the Bible 'heaven' his landscape.[47]

In some respects Chagall took his personal inhabitation of the scriptures a step further and appropriated King David as a personal, biblical alter ego. However, as the pre-eminent Jewish artist of the twentieth century, he also reconfigured the biblical messianic David, not as the slayer of Goliath or the heroic warrior-king of war, but rather as a humble and conflicted man-of-peace, wandering hither and thither with his harp, ever-turning back towards the Lord with his art.

[47] Ben Quash, "Community, Imagination and the Bible", in *The Bible: Culture, Community, Society*, ed. Neil Messer and Angus Paddison (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 2013), 99-121, at 105-6.

Book Reviews

Margaret Daly-Denton, *John: An Earth Bible Commentary – Supposing Him to be the Gardener* (London/New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017). ISBN 9780567674517. Hardcover. Pp. 247. £63.00.

To Johannine scholars moulded along classical lines, the title of this latest work by Irish biblical scholar, Margaret Daly-Denton, may raise eyebrows! It may seem as if the issues of our twenty-first-century are being read backwards into the world of the evangelist and even superimposed on that world. A careful reading of the author's introduction to this commentary will reveal that such is far from being the case. Instead, the author is offering an ecologically sensitive reading of the fourth gospel which is "an attempt to allow the actual process of interpreting the Scriptures from an ecological perspective to transform us, its readers" (p. 2). As such, it is an example of biblical scholarship at the service of contemporised, personalised and globalised *metanoia.* It seeks to make of the current ecological crisis "a hermeneutical lens through which we can look at the Fourth Gospel and see something new" (p. 11). This commentary does, indeed, break new and fertile ground.

The sixteen-chapter work, with its many helpful sub-divisions, is clearly focused on the Johannine Jesus. Yet, it is not a verse-by-verse commentary, and it is (justifiably) selective in its approach to given topics and themes. Ch. 1 is an exposition of the sub-title, 'Supposing Him to be the gardener' (Jn 20:15). Intertextual witness from Gen 2:15, 2:8, Neh 2:8, Ez 28:13-14, 38:12 and elsewhere is invoked, highlighting rich veins of biblical associations with garden, creation, temple and resurrection. The Johannine 'take' on the Risen Jesus viewed as gardener is presented as important in the shaping of 'an ecological ethos', such as that currently proposed by the author and formerly by Barker and Coloe – an ethos "rooted in the vision and symbols of the Christian community" (p. 26). This introductory chapter, unlike those to follow, does not offer suggested means of practically appropriating the explorations of chosen biblical texts and images.

Each of the remaining fifteen chapters exemplifies a methodology which is clear and consistent. The chapter title captures an essential Johannine focus or image: "In the Beginning"; "From Lamplight to Dawn"; "From Wilderness to Fertile Land"; "At the Centre of the Earth"; "Living Water"; "Bread of Life"; "The Good Shepherd", and more. For example, ch. 10, in dealing with The Good Shepherd discourse and imagery, provides a detailed intertextual exploration involving seven texts: Jn 9:1; 9:21; 17:3;

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