

1-1-2013

Marc Chagall, Jeremiah Receives the Gift of Prophecy from God, 1957

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Published version. "Marc Chagall, Jeremiah Receives the Gift of Prophecy from God, 1957," in *Perspectives on Art at the Haggerty Museum*. Milwaukee, WI: Haggerty Museum of Art, 2006: 46-47. [Publisher link](#). © 2006 Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University. Used with permission.



Marc Chagall

French (1887-1985)

Jeremiah Receives the Gift of Prophecy from God, from *The Bible Series*, 1957

Hand-colored etching

24 x 18 in.

Gift of Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty, 80.7.53



arc Chagall's *The Bible Series*, a gift to the Museum from Patrick and Beatrice Haggerty, are 105 etchings based on Old Testament stories. Chagall began the etchings in the early 1930s, having been commissioned by the Parisian art dealer and publisher Ambroise Vollard; the series was finished in 1956. Chagall's experience of the Holocaust is evident in some of the etchings he completed after World War II; his upbringing in a pious Jewish household in Vitebsk, a predominantly Jewish city in what was at that time the Russian czar's empire is also obvious in many of his etchings in this series. These are absolutely wonderful pieces, then, to use in the context of a course on the Bible: not only do they provide the students with "visuals" of some of the Old Testament stories they've read for class, but the etchings also provide the students with a window on the effects of the artist's experiences and history on his art.

I usually use the *Bible Illustrations* in the context of a class I teach on the Old Testament Prophets (Theology 102). Around a dozen of the etchings in the *Bible Illustrations* deal with prophetic themes; for our class visit to the Museum, these are placed on easels in one of the galleries. Using the example of the etching that accompanies this piece, the etching entitled *Jeremiah Receives the Gift of Prophecy from God*, the students can see how Chagall's Jewish background makes him reluctant to try to depict God – in the Old Testament, the verse in the *Book of Jeremiah* begins: "Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth . . ." Here in the Jeremiah etching, as well as elsewhere in his *Bible Illustrations*, Chagall uses the figure of an angel as a "stand in" for God: in the Jewish tradition, any attempt to portray God in art was seen as a violation of one of the Commandments.

In another of the Bible Illustrations etchings, *Crossing of the Jordan*, Chagall's rendering of the Ark of the Covenant is profoundly affected by his childhood in Vitebsk, where he was born in the 1880's. The synagogues of Chagall's youth are long gone, destroyed; only old photographs remain. In several of these photos wall hangings depicting the Ark of the Covenant are prominent; these depictions bear little resemblance to the description of the Ark found in the Old Testament narratives: the two Tablets of the Law are front and center on the wall hangings, as are decorations of rampant lions wearing crowns and the Star of David. It is exactly these wall hangings, though, that Chagall has used as his prototype of the Ark of the Covenant in his etching *Crossing the Jordan*. The artist reached back into his memory when he came to depict the scene of the Israelites carrying the Ark of the Covenant over the Jordan River.

As I mentioned in my first paragraph, I find these etchings an invaluable tool in teaching Theology 102. They help "fix" the stories for the students, by giving them visuals. At the same time, they help the students understand how history and experience can shape our interpretation of these important texts.

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