Jewish Artists and the Bible in Twentieth-Century America

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Scholars of contemporary religious history, of art history, and of the immigrant experience will find much to interest them in this fine volume from Samantha Baskind of Cleveland State University, Ohio. Its subject is the handling of Biblical themes by Jewish artists in a secularised environment, the United States, and five artists in particular – Jack Levine, George Segal, Audrey Flack, Larry Rivers, and R. B. Kitaj – all of whom came of age in the years following the 'third wave' of Jewish immigration between 1880 and 1920. The earliest works under consideration date from the 1930s, and the latest almost up until the date of publication. Jack Levine was born in 1915, and his work from the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s figures prominently here. The work of Audrey Flack, half a generation younger, is represented by works from 1945 (when she was 14 years old) to 2012.

Specialists in British art of the 20th century have long needed to reckon with the work of Jewish artists such as Jacob Epstein (1880–1959), an American-born Jew of Polish extraction who produced work for not one but two cathedrals of the established church – Llandaff and Coventry – both on biblical subjects. More intriguing still is a figure such as Hans Feibusch (1898–1998) who, after arriving in England in the 1930s, converted to Christianity and produced a large number of Christian works on a smaller scale, mainly for churches. Similar stories might be told of Marc Chagall and others. Common to England and most European nations was an established tradition of religious painting and sculpture. Even if critics between the two world wars dealt harshly with the derivative and sentimental nature of much of this work, there was at least a common stock of biblical images with and against which the artist could work.

Not so in the United States. Within American art, such a tradition of historical and religious painting and sculpture was almost non-existent; landscape, domestic scenes and portraiture were dominant. This leads to a question (which Baskind answers definitively): why did Jewish artists – recent arrivals and unsure of their place and status in a new society – adopt artistic subject matter that was not part of the common stock of that society?

Baskind also has an historiographical target at which to aim, being the way in which art produced by Jewish Americans has (and has not) been integrated into the established art-historical story of America. Biblical matter was but a single and subsidiary aspect of the work of each of the five artists, and since art criticism
(in Baskind's view) tends to reward consistency, these elements have been downplayed. In addition, the Jewishness of these works has made their integration into the 'national' narrative of American art harder to achieve. However, Baskind resists the adoption of a biographical approach to the subject that might result in a marginalisation of the works themselves, and which might also be categorised as 'Jewish Studies', thus rendering it invisible to art historians. Baskind would rather argue for the acceptance of Jewishness simply as one of the multiple identities which most people possess, and for a mode of art history that is able to deal simultaneously with all of them.

There is a striking but convincing paradox in Baskind's answer to the question as to why these images were adopted, which offers a suggestive angle from which to view the immigrant experience more generally. The Bible features hardly at all in the work of Marc Chagall when still in Vitebsk, a Russian city with a majority Jewish population, but makes its first appearance after his move to Paris. Chagall's subjects were conditioned by the fact that in Vitebsk he 'felt Jewish every day in the way he ate, the company he kept, and the rules he lived by'. Young immigrant Jews to America and the first generation born there soon found themselves, as Chagall later did in Paris, without any connection to the lived experience of a homeland. 'For these younger American Jews, their native land, their homeland, was the Hebrew Bible. Their sense of locale was not the towns around them but biblical geography – the only Jewish soil they knew'. The Bible functioned as a 'portable identity [...] the stories in the Bible were American Jews' bond to Jewish life' (p. 3).

This identity became not less but more important as the pressure to assimilate came to bear. As these artists became increasingly established as practitioners, and less connected to actual religious worship and practice, there was an increased need to retain some sort of attachment to Judaism as heritage, if not as religious practice. This tended, however, to produce art that was certainly not for use in public worship (a Christian idea), or for private devotion, and only very loosely intended for use in the religious education of the devout. Instead, it functioned as a means of reflecting on and making sense of contemporary events and of recent history at large, and of personal circumstance: a secularised form of the ancient exegetical technique of midrash.

Baskind's study is structured by a set of close readings of the _oeuvres_ of the five key figures of Levine, Segal, Flack, Rivers, and Kitaj – which are surrounded by a small crowd of works by more minor artists. Some of the biblical subjects under discussion are those that might be expected from a Jewish artist: those from the Hebrew scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. Both Levine and Segal engaged with the theme of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Segal repeatedly treated themes of a father's relationship with his children – Lot and his daughters, Abraham and Isaac, Abraham and Ishmael. These could be both personal and political in import. Levine's _Cain and Abel II_ (1969) is here read as an allegory of the Holocaust. Segal's 1978–9 rendering of the story of Abraham and Isaac as a memorial to students killed while protesting against the war in Vietnam was so controversial that it was rejected by the university at which the incident took place, Kent State. (It was later erected at Princeton, near the university chapel). More personally orientated is the treatment by Levine of Adam and Eve, which for Baskind is a recalling of an ancient archetype in conditions of acute personal distress (the terminal illness of his wife), a form of personalised midrash.
Of particular interest to this reviewer were the examples where these Jewish artists addressed themes from the Christian New Testament: appropriations of Christian themes, refracted through a Jewish lens and presented back to Christian America. Abraham Rattner, like Marc Chagall in Europe, found in the crucified Christ an image through which to reflect on the Holocaust. The only example of New Testament imagery from George Segal was of a figure with outstretched arms, Jesus the martyred Jew, in his Holocaust memorial for San Francisco (1984). Baskind is tantalisingly brief on Audrey Flack's use of Mary, the grieving mother of Jesus, as an image through which to explore her own grief over her daughter's autism, since the image of Mary has been ever-present in Christian art of the same period, at least in Europe. There are repeated examples where the Semitic descent of New Testament figures is emphasised, whether it be the Jewish Jesus, or the Jewish David, or the Jewish Apostles, all of whom had been universally Caucasianised in Christian art before the 20th century.

All this is fine work in its own disciplinary terms, but readers who are first and foremost historians may wish for more on the critical and public reception that these works received, precisely to illuminate some of the questions Baskind raises. How did Jewish observers understand these works as midrashic reflections on the lot of American Jewry? How did Christian commentators receive these 'foreign' appropriations of New Testament themes? To what extent were the works met with a simple incomprehension amongst non-religious viewers without the biblical literacy required to read them? As the temporal coverage of the book is very long, questions arise over how these reactions changed as the religious culture of America changed. None of this is to criticise this volume for not achieving what it does not set out to achieve (a besetting sin of reviewers); but Baskind has opened up several fresh and important lines of enquiry for others to pursue.

The press, Pennsylvania State University Press, are to be congratulated for a lavishly produced volume which is a pleasure to hold, with copious reproductions of works of art, and at an improbably low price of $40. The writing is clear and concise, and often elegant, and the work as a whole is admirably brief. Occasionally Baskind strays some way from the scope of the book, such as in the (fascinating and enlightening) examination of depictions of the 'Jewish nose' (pp.122–5), but examples of this are few in what is in general a tightly focussed and coherent volume. It should find an appreciative readership amongst art historians, but also amongst scholars of identity and the immigrant experience, and of the religious history of modern America.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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