

Faculty of Arts
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PHD DISSERTATION: MAIN POINTS

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THE SACRIFICE OF ABRAHAM (GEN. 22:1–18)

THE BIBLICAL SUBJECT IN CHAGALL'S ART

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1. ● The aim of my research is to present the biblical works of Marc Chagall, and within this framework his rendition of *Abraham's sacrifice*. Chagall, one of the most influential artistic personalities of the 20th century, explained and reformulated biblical stories, among other things. The subject of my thesis is Abraham's sacrifice (Gen 22:1–18) within Chagall's art and the unique style applied by him; I make a review of the subject, present the extant artistic illustrations, and subject them to iconographic examination. The **works of Chagall that have a biblical subject**, the unique interpretation they gave, and their specific imaginative world represent a new chapter in the biblical illustration of the 20th century. This is the reason why I was very much taken with the oeuvre of the artist, and in this framework with the *Sacrifice of Isaac*. In my thesis I examine the problem as regards the history of art, namely the extent to which this classic theme could prevail in the modern avant-garde world so characteristic of the early 20th century, and the extent to which it deviated from it in the case of Chagall.

2. ● A separate section deals with the Old Testament interdiction on graven images and notes that its interpretation has changed over the centuries. In this respect, when surveying the oeuvre of Chagall, I try to discover how much his work remained in line with traditions and how much it strayed from them. The case of Chagall has to be linked to the notion of interdiction on graven images, as it is related to the violation of it (at least according to the traditional Jewish interpretation).

At the same time, as a modern artist of the 20th century and as a freethinker ahead of his time, Chagall was able, by means of his particular reinterpretation of the Bible and his pictorial representation of it, to anticipate the Jewish-Christian Europe concept of the present day. Chagall created harmony between contradictions that seemed to be almost irreconcilable. He was able to bridge the chasms that had grown ever wider over the centuries between different religions, ideologies, and, last but not least, between artistic notions. Owing to his capacity to integrate, he was able to formulate his desire: that humanity should live on this earth as one peaceful family.

3 ● Therefore, application of iconographic methodological considerations and a **survey** of the subject on the basis of the **history of religion** are warranted. I deal with the early illustrations of the theme: the frescoes of the synagogue discovered in Dura Europos, the frescoes in the catacombs in Rome, and the floor mosaics found in Beth Alpha, beginning with the miniature depictions.

3.1. The classical theme of the Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Sacrifice of Isaac and the parallels between the Isaac of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the New Testament can be discerned in the art of Chagall as well.

We know that Chagall travelled a lot and that he had, for instance, the opportunity to study *in situ* the bronze doors of the Battistero in Florence that were made by Lorenzo Ghiberti, and also the art of Rembrandt. These artists also illustrated the *Sacrifice of Isaac* and in their works one can also discern traces of the parallels with Christ.

3.2. The exposition of the story, namely the act of sacrifice, is not only a theme for the fine arts, but also one for eminent figures in literature, theology, and philosophy (for example Søren Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*). Numerous representations of it are known from early Christian times onwards. I conducted research on the most distinctive examples of the more important genres. With regard to the significant impact of the theme from the point of view of the history of religion, its depiction was very popular in late classical and early Christian art (3rd to 6th centuries), somewhat rarer from the 6th to 12th centuries, but popular subsequently, right the way up to the present day. The scene belongs among those moments in

the Bible that can be illustrated relatively easily; the event can be presented by evocating just a few motifs and figures (a mountain, bush, altar, hand/angel, ram). Owing to the fact that the depictions were made very variously, I narrowed down my investigation to a given type and approach. In my research I surveyed murals, mosaics, and miniatures, making reference to parallels occurring in sculpture. As well as some genre and mode categories (narrative character, drama) and certain medieval and modern-age Bible illustrations, from later periods I investigated the *deus ex machina* motif on the Ghiberti doors in Florence and in Rembrandt. My main subject was Chagall's Bible illustrations, his monumental paintings, and the stained glass windows he designed for different cathedrals.

3.3 The subject appears in typological cycles

– the Sacrifice of Abraham was adopted as a prefiguration of the Sacrifice of Christ by the Christian liturgy (*Biblia Pauperum*), where we invariably see the culmination of the story – the transcendental element, namely divine intervention – as a parallel with the crucified Christ.

– A special world appears in the sculptural embellishments on the doorways of the early Gothic cathedrals (Chartres, Reims, Amiens), where Abraham appears as a figure in the wings among the ancestors of Jesus. The drawing of parallels between the Sacrifice of Isaac and with Jesus's Sacrifice on the Cross continues from the second half of the 12th century (Klosterneuburg altar, 1181).

3.4. The allegorical and philosophical interpretation of the Old Testament stories goes back all the way to the work of Philo of Alexandria (c. B.C. 20–A.D. 40). In the works of this Greek–Jewish philosopher, Greek philosophy and Jewish traditions become amalgamated. Through the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle he analyses the commentaries appended to the Pentateuch, at the same time adjusting the thoughts of the two philosophers to Holy Writ. In his study *De Abrahamae*, Philo argues that Abraham's sacrifice is unique because he was led not by motives of custom, fear or honour, but solely by love of God. The allegorical-typological interpretation of the text was adopted from Philo first of all by Origenes and later on by the Fathers of the Church.

3.5. The sacrifice of a favourite son is not exclusively an Old Testament theme. Its equivalents can be found in Greek legends also, for example in the story of Iphigenia. The Greeks setting out against Troy were about to sacrifice Iphigenia, the daughter of King Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, at Aulis to the goddess Artemis, when, on account of a contrary wind, their fleet was unable to sail for Troy. But the goddess herself saved Iphigenia at the last minute and took her as her priestess to the land of the barbarian Taurians (in the Crimea).¹

In 1922 Smith summed up the types of illustration concerning Abraham's sacrifice; I add these to my work as a supplement.

3. • **The parallels between Isaac and Jesus.** From the point of view of Christianity, it is owing to Abraham's faith and to his readiness as a father to sacrifice his son that he achieves the Covenant with God, the purpose of which is to prepare the way for the work of Redemption. Isaac and also the lamb offered in his place became, by way of substitute satisfaction (*satisfactio vicaria*), prefigurations of Christ.

¹ The motif was adapted by Goethe in his drama *Iphigenia in Tauris*.

I sum up in a separate section the rabbinical interpretation of my subject, since Chagall spent his childhood in this spirit.

When examining Chagall's painting from the point of view of its biblical interpretations, questions emerge: To what extent was Chagall's approach to the Bible Jewish and to what extent was it Christian? Is there such a thing as Christian or Jewish representation, or, surveying the master's oeuvre, can there be both at one and the same time? In this respect it is difficult to assign the artist to any category. Neither Chagall nor those placing orders with him thought his religious affiliation or world-view (*Weltanschauung*) to be important when they entrusted him with illustration of the Bible or with the design of windows for cathedrals, churches, or synagogues. From the point of view of artistic talent there is no difference between a synagogue and a cathedral. For Chagall the most important thing was to find the expression and voice of universal religion: compared with this, the motif itself was of secondary importance.

5. ● Chagall's world raises the question of what his secret was and how he got through to people with his art. By reformulating his memories, he created his **own 'iconography'**. In Paris, in the centre of seething French intellectual life – he continued, in Montparnasse, to develop his individual style. Important 20th-century trends in art – cubism and surrealism – exerted an influence on him. Surrealism experienced its heyday between the two world wars. André Breton's first surrealist manifesto (in 1924) formulated the three connected basic ideas as a variant of 19th-century realism as mood, dreams and 'anti-logic' (the absurd). This exerted an impact on many artists. According to it, the artist had to be freed from constraints of logic and had to reach above everyday consciousness to the 'super-reality' that lay beyond. Freud's theory of the unconscious is valid for Chagall insofar as his paintings depict the fantasy-world of his dreams.

It was Apollinaire who on seeing Chagall's pictures first used the expression surrealist. The new achievements in technique and form in the ferment that was Paris around 1910 had an influence on Chagall, as did his meetings later on with such personages as Max Ernst, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Picasso, Fougère, Cocteau, Archipenko, Cendrars, Kisling, Zadkine, and Tihanyi. But apart from painters, Hemingway, Gershwin, Wilder, Faulkner, Joyce, and T. S. Eliot were also living there, to mention just the best known. Gombrich (who dealt with modern art) and Werner Hofmann raised the methodological consideration that with regard to creating signified a much broader creative impulse, the aim of which was the spiritual re-evaluation of the whole of reality. This was valid for Chagall's religious subjects also: he went beyond the frame of works of art that had been customary hitherto, at the same time following in his subjects the Christian tradition of depiction mixed with his own system of symbols.

The other face of Chagall is that at the same time he remained a painter with a childlike soul who felt an aversion towards theories who and did not seek, as the surrealists and Dadaists did, consciously to vex the bourgeois. Breton wrote of him that 'with him metaphor entered painting in triumph'. Following the creation of the early works in Russia, in his second Paris period he became increasingly well known. It is as if his pictures are made with a naïve, childlike purity, which comes from the heart and soul of spontaneity.

6 ● My aim is also to cast light on the connection between Chagall and the new ecclesiastical manifestations of the 20th century. The influence of Paris meant freedom in the life of the artist; it was a place where he could discuss the new trends and philosophical thoughts and where he could work. The Sacrifice of Isaac and in this connection the story of Jesus, as well as the parallels between the two, brought, with the Second Vatican Council, a new spirit in the manifestation of the church. The intellectuals, philosophers and artists of the

20th century were participants in this process. In the light of this, Chagall's interpretation of the Bible achieves a larger dimension. This is the thinking that Chagall represents through his art in his religious pictures, through his particular interpretation and style.

His friendship with **Jacques Maritain**, the well-known French philosopher of the 20th century, illuminates and provides an explanation for the development of his personal iconography that depicts Jewish-Christian motifs. Maritain was a professor of philosophy at Paris's *Institut Catholique* (1913–40) and contributed in a creative way to the development of Christian philosophy, to a modern interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas, to European humanist thinking, and a modern formulation of the relationship between Catholicism and politics and of human rights theory. Maritain was on terms of friendship with Pope John XXIII (1881–1963), whose name is linked to the calling together of the Second Vatican Council (1961–65). This Council took important decisions, the influence of which affects Jewish-Christian dialogue to this day and the integration of the cultural roots of Europe; it rethought the connection of the church and the non-Christian religions, the Jewish religion included.

As an important continuation of the ideas discussed on the occasion of the Second Vatican Council, **John Paul II, Karol Jozef Wojtyla** (1920–2005), the Polish pope, during his pilgrimage tour of 2000, asked forgiveness in the name of the church for all the sins committed by the members of the historical church against other religions, God and their fellow-men.

The new spirit of the church is underlined by the fact that Jean-Marie Lustiger, the archbishop of Paris who died in 2007, was born into a Polish Jewish immigrant family. Their lives – that of the church leader and that of the artist – can be brought into parallel.

During his first sojourn in Paris, Chagall became acquainted with the new artistic trends (cubism and surrealism, among others) and with artists, and he absorbed the important ideas of the early 20th century. To begin with, he painted images remembered from home, everyday scenes of Hassidic Jewish life. The depiction of this closed world had impact as a curiosity on modern contemporary painting.

Later on it became important for Chagall to integrate the two religions, the Old and the New Testaments. He was bold, and almost completely unique in that he painted Christ on the Cross and around Him a burning village and people fleeing. The greatness of Chagall lies in the fact that he represents, on a high level and through artistic means, an important religious idea of the 20th century, a united **Jewish-Christian Europe**.

Nowadays it already seems natural to talk in a united Europe about universal views of this continent as corresponding to Jewish-Christian culture. Chagall contributed to this with his works on biblical subjects, with the Golgotha series as well as with the foundation of the Museum for the Message of the Bible.

When Chagall was commissioned to make the Bible illustrations, he saw, during the journey he made to Palestine in 1931 (which had the greatest effect on his life), the past and the present (and later, in 1948, the rebirth of Israel), the land of his ancestors shining resplendently which merged with his childhood memories. This inspired the engravings and the painting of his colour pictures. When he recreated his biblical figures in Vence (1950–55), he already thought in monumental sizes, freely and without constraints.

Chagall's greatness consists precisely in his ability to step beyond all dogma and denominational isolation to express the reality of religion, namely suffering and love.