

# Thirty-Six Biblical Paintings by Janet Shafner

## Foreword

by Ori Z. Soltes

"Cosmogony" is a Greek word meaning "the coming to be of order". It is generally applied to the process of ordering the universe: creation. The Hebrew Bible is the ultimate creation story. While the first chapter or so of Genesis offers a concise account, with a minimum of detail, of the physical creation, that chapter proves to be a mere prelude to the real cosmogony. For it culminates with the shaping of humankind, and thereafter the moral and spiritual ordering of the universe begins, featuring a succession of individuals working together with God. That ordering process is deemed to continue not only through the entirety of the biblical text, but in the thousands of years since the text was committed to written form.

The partners with God in bringing about Order on a spiritual and moral plane, the characters in the Bible and the subsequent generations of students of the biblical text, range from prophets and priests to scribes and scholars to poets and artists. Everyone who, guided by the Covenantal principles articulated in the Bible, seeks to improve the world around him, is such a partner. There can be no end of partnering possibilities, since the process of creation remains radically unfinished.

Like every exponent of *midrash* – digging beneath the surface of a text to extract its layers of meaning – and every scholar, every artist who engages the Bible helps to shape its presence among us. Each generation interprets – verbally, visually and otherwise – the manner in which the biblical narrative offers specific application to a given time and place. It is one of the marks of the Bible's genius that its applicability is so extensive. It is part of each interpreter's genius to recognize the ways in which the text's meanings are timeless and thus as contemporary as they are ancient. Janet Shafner is one visual interpreter who has been particularly successful in accomplishing this – and in doing so, also fulfilling a requirement of artistic interpretation: that it be as visually compelling as the text is conceptually compelling.

Perhaps the number 36 – the number of Shafner's biblical paintings in what follows – is not accidental. In the numerology of Hebrew it puns twice. It doubles the number for "life" – eighteen, contrived of the two Hebrew letters that stand for "8" and "10" respectively.

And the Hebrew Bible is the ultimate pattern book, for Jews, of how to live the good life. Its tales are instructions of how to be and warnings of how not to be. Its characters are simultaneously bigger than life – heroes and heroines on the grand scale, defined by their spiritual (rather than physical) prowess, in turned shaped by the uniqueness of their relations with God – and no different from you and me.

Thirty-six is also the number of hidden righteous ones for whom, according to a thread of legend within the tapestry of Jewish mysticism, the world continues to exist, in spite of all the horrors that might otherwise have caused God to destroy it.

The Bible offers the beginning of the ultimate, unanswerable questions that frame human existence by paradox. How does an invisible, intangible, singular God create a visible, tangible, endlessly multifarious universe. More hauntingly, why is it that an all-powerful, all-good God has created the universe and yet evil seems to be a repeated part of its evolution? Why does God grant us free will and never take it away from us, given what a consistent mess we make of things through the abuse of that gift?

The answer in Jewish mystical terms is that there are 36 righteous ones, in each generation, because of whom God doesn't destroy us all. This notion itself emerges out of the different turnings and interpretations with which the Bible confronts the very idea of "righteousness" and its rewards. In Genesis 6-9, Noah was the "righteous one within his generation," and he and his family were preserved when everyone and everything else was destroyed. In Genesis 17, Sodom and Gemorrah *could* have been preserved had there only been 10 righteous men within those two cities. In the Holocaust the righteous perished together with the unrighteous without an intelligible logic. The world survives, never to be destroyed as it was in Noah's time, because of the 36 who survive with us and who perish with those of us who are lost.

That number might be said to connect the concerns set forth in the Bible with those resonating from the Destruction of the Temple to the Holocaust. To grapple with the mysteries of the Bible in the second half of the twentieth century is also, inevitably, to grapple with the Holocaust and the progression of genocides that have marked human history since the Holocaust, particularly since the Bible is so often turned to by those attempting to understand the theological implications of the Holocaust.

Janet Shafner has been haunted by the Bible in her art for years. If her visual readings of the text are modern, they also are cognizant of centuries of interpretation. They are particularly aware of the Jewish mystical tradition as they are inevitably informed by everything that is compelling in the world of today, in which the legacy of the Holocaust, particularly for a Jewish artist, rests over everything like the sand of the desert after the *hamsin* winds have forced it through the nooks and crannies of our doorways and window frames. Her images speak a language that is as old as it is new. Light and shadow contend for primacy on her canvases. They echo the dark and light aspects of human experience, the human soul, the Divine gifts to God's ultimate creation.

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