

## **Women of Mystery, Men of Prophecy**

by JANET SHAFNER

In the late Eighties, I came to the end of a series of landscapes that, inspired by a trip to Israel, had begun to look like biblical terrain. I had been working on them for two years but they no longer interested me. I could find no inspiration until a friend said, "Just start painting the simplest thing you can find".

It was Autumn, and I went into my backyard, gathered some branches of my apple tree with its wormy apples, set them into Perrier bottles and began to paint. With great gobs of oil color loaded on my brush, I painted the apples with their luscious shadows of violet and green, and found myself thinking of Adam and Eve. These same apples, now in front of me, were mysteriously connected to the apples that so seductively confronted our first ancestors. How to make the connection?

I remembered studying Romanesque church facades; how the entrance doors were surmounted by a lunette over the lintel which displayed a significant scene of a transcendent world. Those entering the temporal world of the interior of the building were reminded of the connection. By superimposing a lunette form on the main canvas, I could now treat the two parts of the painting as two realms, one temporal and one transcendent, connected by a common idea.

I began to explore the Hebrew Bible. Although I live as an observant Jew, I never had a religious education. Reading through the texts for subject matter became my way of learning. I found that the dramatic lives of our Biblical ancestors were strikingly contemporary, and I was fascinated by the connections. Everything that touches us deeply today has a parallel occurrence in the Bible – family jealousy, sexual obsession, enduring love and sacrifice, murder, rape, incest, man's inhumanity to his fellow, even ethnic cleansing – it was all there.

I began to read commentaries and associated texts such as Midrash, which explores the inner meaning of the Hebrew writings. I found it to be a profound source of inspiration for the paintings. Women of the Bible particularly fascinated me, and I made dozens of paintings of women who revealed their wisdom and power by taking action that changed the course of history. I also painted the conflicts and visions of men.

How to take the mysterious messages of Genesis and interpret them in pictures has taken me years to do. For example, the story of Lot and his wife was a typical investigation which revealed the human element beyond the bare narrative and inspired multiple paintings. Even children are intrigued with the story of Lot's wife who turns into a pillar of salt. We know that a pillar of salt remained in Israel for centuries and there was even a special blessing that was said when it was encountered. Who was Lot's wife and why her strange transforming death? The Bible reveals only the bare bones of the story, so I found the various accounts in Midrash, and the mysteries began to unravel. The sages said that Lot's wife was a Sodomite named Eeris who married Abraham's relative, Lot. She was a woman who had the kindness of Abraham's influence but the cruelty of Sodom in her bones.

Two angels, disguised as men, were sent to Sodom to destroy it. Lot approached them and invited them to his home for a meal. The Sodomites lived in plenty and resisted sharing it with anyone, torturing and killing all visitors. Eeris was angry that Lot had endangered them, and when she went to her neighbors to borrow salt, she revealed to them that guests had come.

In the narrative, the Sodomites stormed the house and Lot and his family were taken by the angels to safety. They were told that God's *Shechina* (spirit) would descend upon the city and they could not look back. Eeris' two other daughters and their families refused to believe the warning and would not leave their wealth and comfort. In the painting, Eeris has looked back to see if they had followed, and in that moment of maternal longing and pity, she saw the *Shechina* and died. Thus she was punished for revealing the strangers by asking for salt, and salt she became.

By attaching a lunette to the primary canvas, I had a way of juxtaposing an interesting new form and deepening the meaning of the story. The lunette shows another of Lot's daughters, P'Lotis, who was married to an eminent Sodomite. She noticed a starving stranger in the streets. She brought him bread and water, was found out, and as her punishment the Sodomites smeared her with honey and placed her on the parapets of the City where the bees consumed her. The sages tell us that her cries reached to heaven, and because of them God destroyed the city. There is even more to the account, namely the incest of Lot and his daughters, which is hinted at in the left side of the rectangular canvas and which is explored in another painting, *Lot and His Daughters*.

Kindness and cruelty, family interactions, love and its perversions, and the overarching principle that God is watching our actions, are cosmic themes that are even difficult to put into words. I want to explore the deep significance that I find in the lives of our Biblical ancestors and their continuing connection and message to us today. And I want to do it in paint. Using the interaction of multiple panels and subjects allows me to explore some of these themes from various viewpoints. Although the pictures reveal much of the stories, even more is merely suggested. I leave it to the observer to bring his or her own sensibility to the work, and connect to it from their own experience.

Some of the narratives in the Bible are so brief and so mysterious that students of the sacred writings devote years to exploring their recondite wisdom. The story of the Garden of Eden captivated me, and I devoted a number of years to painting various aspects of the story of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel and the hidden daughters.

What is there in that primeval story that evokes such a deep response in us all? Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik tells us that in the center of the Garden stood two trees –the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. They represent our deepest yearnings – to know the mystery of being and to defeat death. And it is precisely these two wishes that can never be fulfilled.

The Torah tells us to *get us a heart of wisdom*, yet true wisdom can never be ours. Eve, goaded by the serpent, chooses wisdom over eternal life and persuades her mate to follow her. In a world of chaos in which we have no answers for the injustices and random cruelties of life, we might assail God for our misfortunes. But we read in the account of the Garden that it was man who brought death, pain and labor to the world, not God.

Some believe that God placed the tree of knowledge in the center of the Garden precisely to tempt man. By internalizing the knowledge of good and evil, man was given free choice. Eternal life in a glorious Eden was replaced by a life in which the struggle to do good in a profane world is constant. Many of the paintings of Cain and Abel depict some of the evils that descended upon the world from their actions – wars inspired by hatred between brothers, hangings, quarterings and other brutal killings in the name of God.

In the painting of *The Sparks* and *Ruth and Boaz*, I have referred to the Kabbalistic concept that man's mission on this earth is to gather the sparks of the divine light that descend into our realm from "the shattering of the vessels" and to elevate them back to their unity by acts of goodness. Many of the paintings such as *Ezekial's Vision*, *Ruth and Boaz*, and *Daniel* are about prophetic messages of hope.

In the final painting of the exhibition, *Entropy*, Adam and Eve are witness to the destruction that modern man has created. Recently, I heard Elie Wiesel say that the most tragic figure in the Bible is God, because, having created a perfect world, he has had to watch man, his greatest creation, constantly subvert it. Yet even this painting has in its lunette a symbol of renewal.

Making emotionally charged ideas into paintings can become mere illustration, so I am constantly aware that the vitality of the paint and the integrity of the image must be primary. I work directly on the canvas or wood panel using oil paint without preliminary drawings. The pieces are large, averaging 50"x60", although some with side panels may be as wide as 90". The images are invented or based very loosely on references from print media. I tend to use a loaded brush and will paint over and over a panel until it feels right, often scratching through or roughing up the surface with knives and blades.

Since the first Adam and Eve painting which inspired the series in 1988, I have painted almost seventy paintings in this series and destroyed about twenty that were unsatisfactory. It is the longest running set of paintings on a common theme that I have done, and I find it still a rich and endless mine of inspiration and learning.

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