

Juxtapositions: Midrashic Images

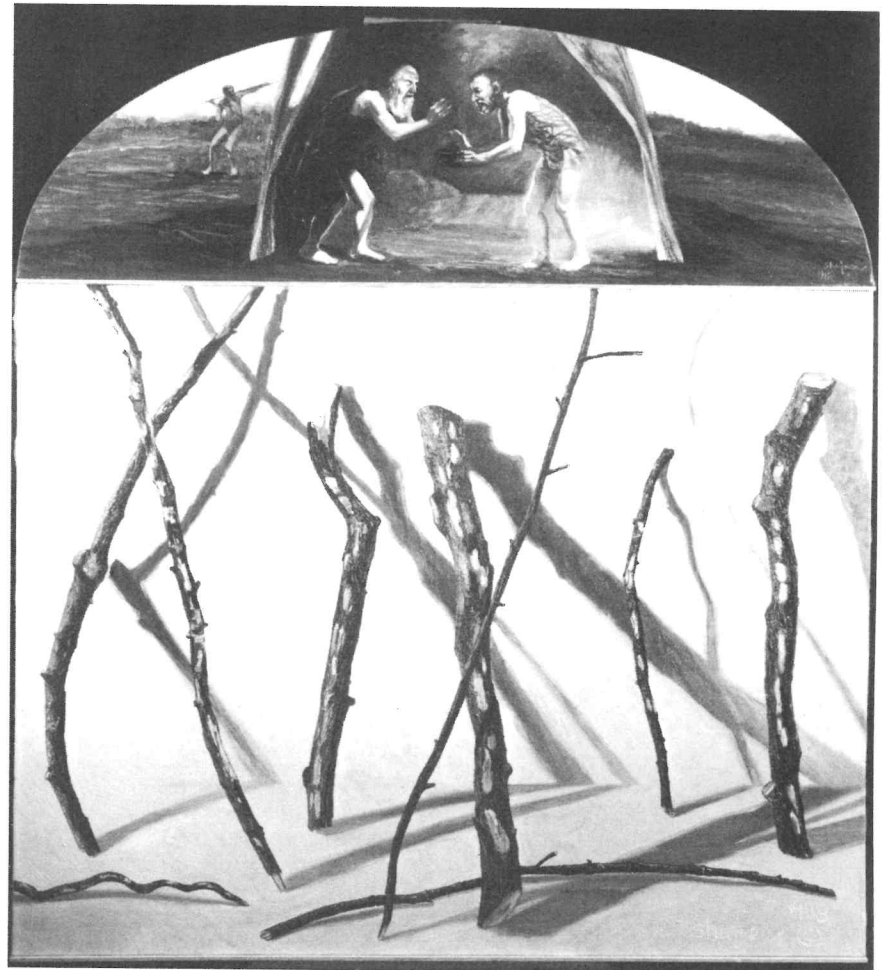
Janet Shafner

For a long time I have been fascinated by how the dramatic events in the lives of our Biblical ancestors have striking parallels to events in contemporary life—from family jealousy and murder to mob rape and ethnic cleansing; from sexual obsession to enduring love. Everything that touches us deeply has an archetypal occurrence in the Bible.

In these paintings, I have tried to pictorialize the links between these interlocking worlds, and to use the relationships among the connected panels of each painting to deepen the layers of meaning. Using the semicircular lunette above a traditional rectangular form allows me to connect an image derived from a Biblical or Talmudic event with another image representing a contemporary issue, a related Biblical narrative, or a classical midrash. The essence of the visual midrash lies largely in this juxtaposition.

I work directly on the canvas or wood panel using oil paint, without preliminary drawings. The pieces are large, averaging 58" x 50". The images are invented, or based very loosely on references from print media. As I work, I am constantly aware that translating emotionally charged ideas into images can become mere illustration—so the vitality of the paint and the independent integrity of the image must be primary.

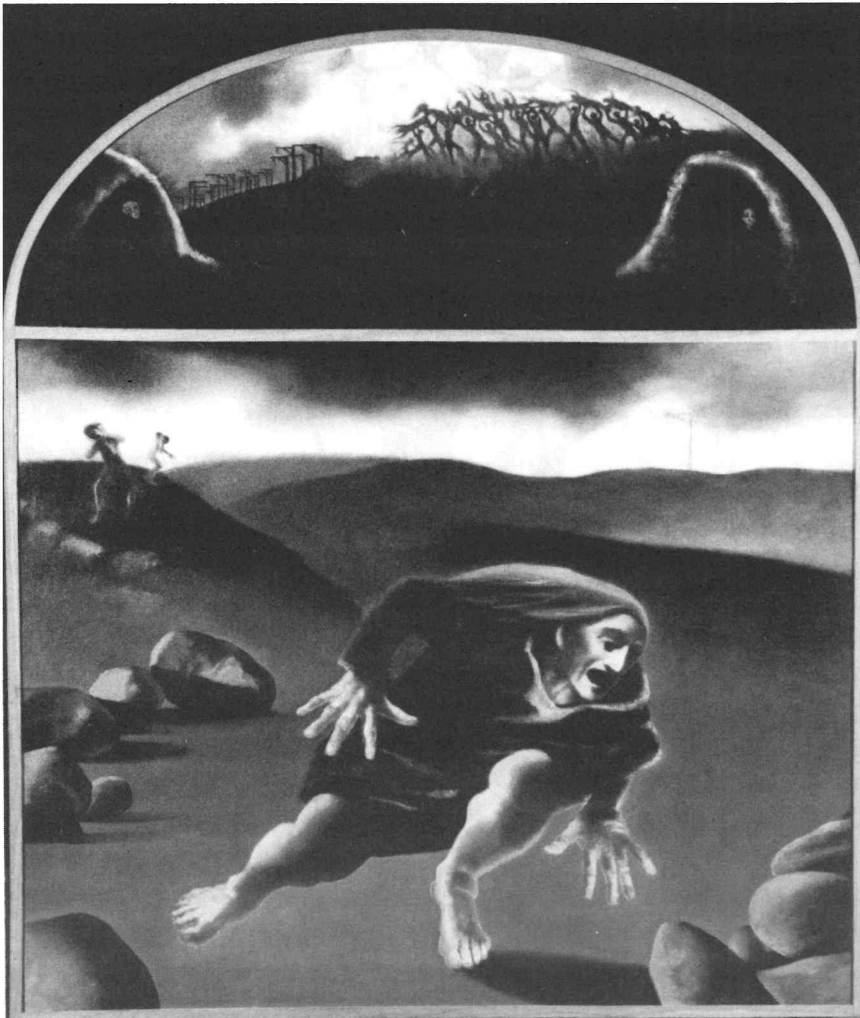
To date, I have completed 50 paintings in this group, since the first Adam and Eve lunette/canvas that inspired the series in 1988. Thirty-six of them will be exhibited at the Lyman Allyn Art Museum in New London, Connecticut, from January to June, 2003. It is the longest running set of pieces based on a common theme that I have done, and still I find the biblical text an endless mine of inspiration and learning.



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Isaac and Jacob (Genesis 27:1-45, 30:25-31:17)

Jacob deceives his father into giving him the blessing intended for the first-born, while his elder brother is off hunting in the fields. Later he uses speckled sticks to induce the birth of streaked and spotted lambs and goats, increasing his rightful share among his father-in-law's flocks. Thus deceit and cunning—which mark his life, both as victim and perpetrator—are used to improve his position, and to win both spiritual and physical advantage.



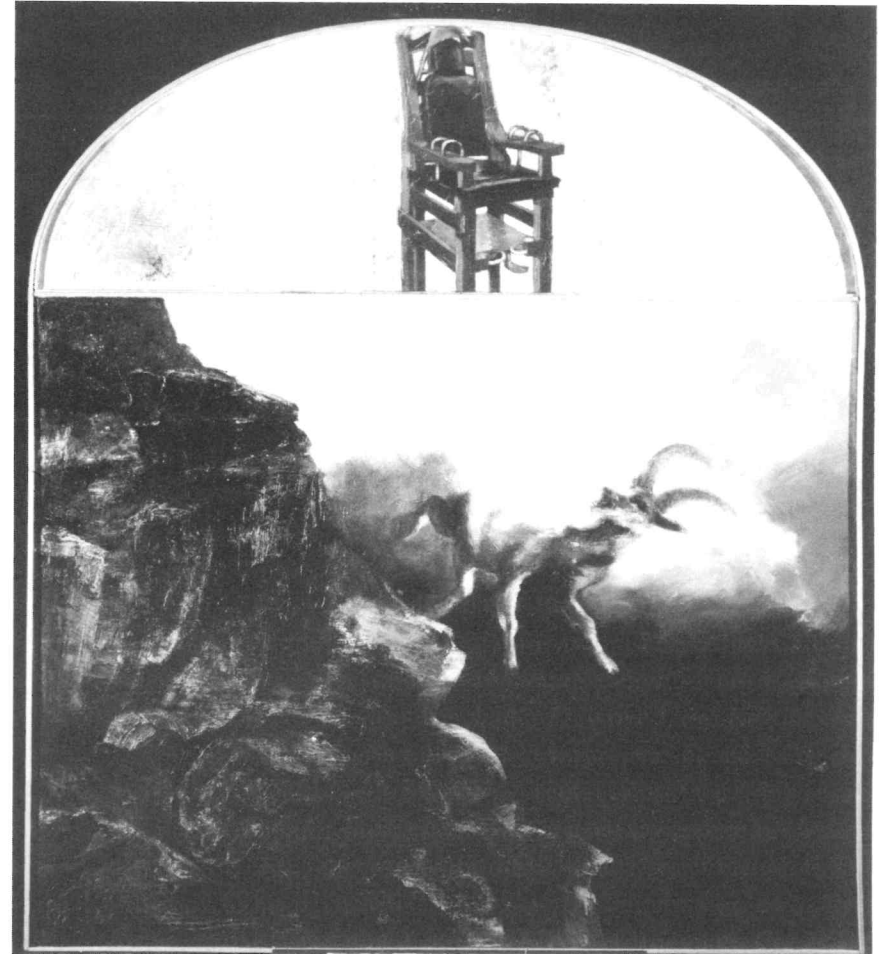
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The Stoning/Witches of Ashkelon
(Jerusalem Talmud: Sanhedrin 6.9, Haggigah 2.2)

R. Shimon ben Shetach (1st century C.E.) engineers the hanging of 80 “witches” in one day, depriving them of due legal process of investigation, warning, and testimony of witnesses. Later commentators justify the extralegal action as an emergency measure to deal with an extreme danger to the community.

Azazel: The Scapegoat (Leviticus 16:7-26)

In an ancient Temple ritual, two goats are sacrificed on Yom Kippur: one on the altar, and the second, bearing the sins of the people, is cast into the wilderness for “Azazel.” Inheritors of the notion of a scapegoat, our society believes that evil can be removed by killing the sinners among us.

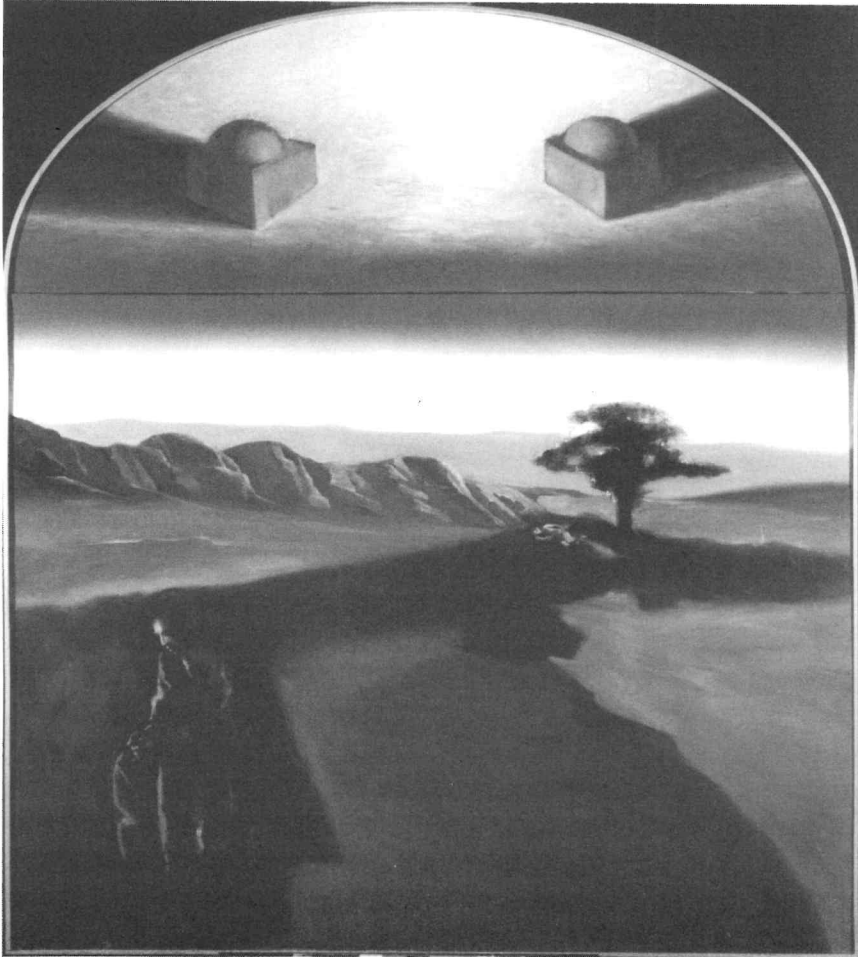


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Janet Shafner lives in New London, Connecticut, where she has lectured and taught at area colleges and museums for the last 30 years. Her paintings have been exhibited regionally and nationally, including 18 solo exhibitions and numerous group shows.

Hagar (Genesis 21:9-21)

Hagar, expelled with Ishmael from the house of Abraham at the directive of Sarah, sits “a bowshot away” from her son, who is dying from thirst in the desert. Saved by a miraculous well, they become the progenitors of the Arab nations. Generations later, the houses of Sarah and Hagar remain so divided that even their shadows fall in opposite directions.



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Adam and Eve: The Tenth Hour (Genesis 2:25 - 3:24)

Adam and Eve clothe themselves in leaves, revealing their disobedience in eating from the forbidden tree. A midrash suggests that the fruit that causes the couple’s expulsion is the bitter heart-shaped etrog—one of the four species used during the fall festival of Sukkot.

An additional image appears on page 88.