

Genesis: a visual exploration
Stephen Guyon Bird



Stephen Guyon Bird

GENESIS
a visual exploration

The Farmington Institute

2016

First published on the occasion of the
exhibition *Genesis: a visual exploration*
at Durham Cathedral, 2 to 31 March 2016

Published with the support of
The Farmington Institute
Harris Manchester College
University of Oxford OX1 3TD
www.farmington.ac.uk

Paintings © Stephen Guyon Bird
www.sgbirdart.uk

Reflections and commentary
by Dom Henry Wansbrough OSB
Ampleforth Abbey
henry@ampleforth.org.uk

Designed and typeset
by Nye Hughes, Dalrymple

Printed by Albe De Coker, Antwerp

Curated by Caledonia Armstrong

Thanks to Henry Bird and Jill Craven
for editorial advice

Preface 7

Foreword 9

Introduction 11

The Paintings 13

The Creator 14

The Big Bang 16

The Potter 18

Naming the Animals 20

The Shaping of Eve 22

The Sabbath 24

The Pleasure-Garden of Eden 26

The Fall 28

Paradise Lost 30

The Life of Toil 33

Cain and Abel 34

The Repentance of Cain 36

The Building of the Ark 38

The Flood 41

The Tower of Babel 42

Abraham's Three Visitors 44

Hagar and Ishmael 47

The Sacrifice of Isaac 48

Jacob's Ladder 50

Jacob at the Crossing of the River Jabbok 52

Joseph interprets Pharaoh's Dream 54

Commentary on the Genesis stories 57

Biography 61

Preface

This catalogue accompanies a touring exhibition of 21 paintings by Stephen Guyon Bird of stories from the *Book of Genesis*. The paintings are oil and acrylic on canvas and were created over a two-year period and most are three by two feet in size.

The foreword is by the Rev Dr Ralph Waller, Principal of Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford and Director of the Farmington Institute, which has supported the exhibition.

There is an introduction to the artist and his work and the background to the Genesis series.

Each painting is accompanied in the catalogue by the artist's commentary on his art historical and personal references.

There is also a reflection on each painting by Dom Henry Wansbrough, a monk of Ampleforth Abbey and Magister Scholarum of the English Benedictine Congregation. He is a former member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and served as Chairman of the Oxford Faculty of Theology. He was also General Editor of the *New Jerusalem Bible* and until recently was Alexander Jones Professor of Biblical Studies at Liverpool Hope University.

The final chapter of the catalogue contains Dom Henry's scholarly commentary on the Genesis stories depicted in the exhibition.

Genesis: a visual exploration is curated by Caledonia Armstrong.



Foreword

Genesis: a visual exploration by Stephen Guyon Bird has been supported from its inception by the Farmington Institute. He is the first artist and art teacher to receive a Farmington Scholarship in recognition of the spiritual and exploratory nature of his work. The intention is that this exhibition and accompanying catalogue will stimulate renewed interest and questioning of the Genesis stories.

The Farmington Institute was founded to support, encourage and improve religious education in schools, colleges and universities and to develop good relationships between world religions. Bobby Wills founded the Institute 50 years ago after his recovery from serious injuries while serving with the Grenadier Guards in the Second World War. He became convinced that teaching and encouraging spiritual insight into the work of great religious thinkers was the key to ensuring such a conflagration was never repeated and set about committing a large slice of his own wealth to this end.

As a result of his generous endowment, Farmington has been able to grant Scholarships through the years to hundreds of teachers, who spend a period of time in university or college, pursuing and developing aspects of spiritual, moral and religious study. Most regard the sabbatical as a rare and precious opportunity to reflect, take stock and recharge their batteries. Their Scholarship papers are published on the Farmington Institute website as a resource for all those involved in education.

Farmington also grants Fellowships in moral and ethical leadership to aspiring headteachers as well as members of Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

For Stephen G. Bird, his two Farmington Scholarships have provided the chance to create substantial works – the first a polyptych of the Last Judgement, and the second this ambitious Genesis series. We hope people will enjoy and ponder over these paintings, that they will appreciate the idiosyncratic vision of the artist and that the works will stimulate further reflection on the powerful and perplexing Genesis narratives.

REV DR RALPH WALLER
*Director of the Farmington Institute
and Principal of Harris Manchester College,
University of Oxford*



The making of Genesis: a visual exploration

Genesis: a visual exploration is the work of artist Stephen Guyon Bird, Head of Art and the History of Art at Ampleforth College and a former student of Chelsea and then Goldsmiths schools of art.

Stephen G. Bird has drawn every day for the whole of his adult life and has a formidable archive of sketchbooks, prints, drawings and paintings. He has exhibited only latterly, but has built up devoted followers of both his landscapes and his visceral, imaginative paintings.

In 2005 Stephen G. Bird was awarded his first Scholarship with the Farmington Institute to explore the iconography of the Last Judgement, which led to the creation of a large-scale polyptych.

His second Farmington Scholarship was awarded in 2013 to develop a series of paintings based on the stories of the *Book of Genesis*, a multi-layered odyssey in line and symbol. His lifelong preoccupation with drawing and with narrative has led him to this great, powerful story, which has underpinned so much Western art and literature.

Genesis: a visual exploration is essentially a sequence of visual reflections, through the Genesis narrative, on the human condition and the nature of being, weaving in and out of time and space.

The Genesis stories are fractured, kaleidoscopic, strange, poetic, discomfiting and Stephen G. Bird's paintings reflect these characteristics. There is humour in the paintings – because life is funny and sometimes silly. But life can be dark and terrifying and the works also express violence, depicting the murderer and the murdered, the lost and the found.

The paintings are intended to allow the Genesis stories to be explored from different angles; not as literal truths, nor as dangerous and fantastical untruths, but as narratives that are part of our

cultural warp and weft and therefore remain worthy of our reflection.

The Genesis project has been funded by Farmington to encourage people to return again to these stories, or turn to them for the first time and wonder about their meaning and significance.

Each picture has an accompanying reflective text from Dom Henry Wansbrough, a Benedictine monk of Ampleforth Abbey.

Dom Henry, who has been a friend and a colleague of Stephen G. Bird's for the past 30 years, is an international biblical scholar. He also grew up in a family with a history of connections with literary and artistic figures, including Hilaire Belloc, John Sargent and Edward Burne-Jones. He was therefore greatly interested in Stephen G. Bird's Genesis paintings, enjoying the opportunity to respond personally to the images, but also to provide biblical, scholarly insight to the stories.

The paintings are multi-layered in their composition and symbolism, and move imaginatively between worlds, so that Noah, for example, becomes a boat builder in Deptford Creek in 1970s London and Jacob wrestles with the angel on the side of a Hebridean loch. The familiar narratives are thus shaken free from any literal meaning.

The style is singular and evocative, based on layers of colour, pattern and closely woven composition. On one level they seem primitive, held together by line, as line holds together a medieval illumination or a cartoon strip from the 1950s Beano. The body, for example, is often broken down and bolted together to make a muscular arabesque. On another level the paintings are complex in their construction and their references to art and literature.



2014
SGBird

The story of Adam and Eve, of Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob's ladder, the beginning and end of time in God's creation are in images everywhere throughout the history of art and religion. We find them in the muscular figures of Michelangelo, in Romanesque missals, in prayer book and psalter, in folk art, church carvings and frescos, though the latter often faded and dissolved by salt and frost. There is an abiding interest in the beginning and the end of things – in the Big Bang, or God creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh. The nature of time continues to absorb us as well as the nature of man's journey through time as he evolves, or after he has left the Garden.

Stephen G. Bird's Genesis series is set largely in the 1970s in South East London – olden times for modern youth. This is the time and place of his formative years and accordingly has an overlay of nostalgia. The landscape of the North Yorkshire Moors where he currently lives and frequent visits to the Hebrides and the rugged coastline of the Hartland peninsula in north Devon, as well as visits to Florence, also inform the work. Day-to-day experiences, close observation and art historical influences are intertwined.

The nature of the imagery is both mythical and domestic and is highly symbolic. For example, the bird in the cage could be viewed as The Holy Spirit; the cat seems a homely companion in some pictures, but in others it has an ambivalent, amoral but knowing presence, sphinx-like.

Fundamentally, the Genesis series is also about the nature and the power of drawing.

In childhood Stephen G. Bird loved the *Beano* and the graphic line of the comic book, which gives clear and rapid shape to things. He copied

illustrations – the works of Ardizzone, Rackham, Shepherd and pictures from his childhood Bible – and as he grew up he drew inspiration from the imaginative paintings of William Blake, Samuel Palmer and Stanley Spencer, among others. Drawing has given real freedom to his imagination and his love of story. He never tires from the thrill of being able to create whole new worlds from putting pencil to paper.

At art school Stephen G. Bird's tutors included the artist Ken Kiff and John Bellany, the Scottish painter, whose poetic, nostalgic, mythical paintings of fisherman and the sea affirmed his preoccupation with narrative. Another influential teacher was Leonard McComb who taught him the language of drawing. McComb's students were taught to look and look and look again and then to recreate the world through line and shape, pattern and form and this has had a lasting impact.

Drawing, Stephen G. Bird believes, gives us an intense experience of the world around us through 'eyeballing' as David Hockney puts it; or taking a line for a walk, to use a Paul Klee expression. Drawing is an act of thinking through making; an act of creation using the simplest of tools – pencil and paper, paintbrush and canvas, pen and ink.

Genesis: a visual reflection is therefore just that – an exploration of the nature of drawing and of the richness of the Genesis narratives and their evocative power.

The Paintings

The accompanying text for each painting contains commentary by the artist [SGB] followed by a personal reflection by Dom Henry Wansbrough [HW].

The Creator

I do find discussions about the Big Bang completely fascinating and struggle through popular science books on cosmology. I don't think I understand much of it – but it is wonderful stuff and gives one a cosy radioactive glow.

It seems to me that artists cannot depict the beginning of time – we should leave it to those who can conjure with equations. The story of a man with a beard will do for me because the complexity and mystery of creation is beyond my comprehension. SGB

So it all began in a basement – and a rather cramped basement at that – where sits the unpretentious Watchmaker God, working by the light of a cheap lamp. It is still only the dawn of time, and there is not yet enough light for much real colour, though the stairs are leading up into light, and one can already hear the busy London street above. What will be at the top of those stairs in the full light of day? Perhaps the cat knows, that symbol of secret, impenetrable wisdom. Animals are often the clue in this series of pictures. The cat lies there, contentedly purring, its front paws crossed; it knows but will not intervene: what shall be must be. But it is the eyes of God which are finally arresting; they are the eyes of One of Great Age, tired, wise and above all sad, for he knows the sorrows and sadness that man will make for himself in the world the painstaking God is so carefully creating. Where have I seen before those nail-pincers lying dumbly on the table? They are ready to take the nails out of the hands of the crucified Christ at his Deposition from the Cross. HW



The Big Bang

Of course God is not an old man with a beard and certainly not in a Paddington basement – so there can be no mistaking the unimaginable with the imagined. I was thinking about my great grandfather in his basement kitchen, lighting the fire in the cold light of dawn, then fixing the clock and brewing tea. I was thinking of Blake's 'Ancient of Days', in turn surely inspired by a 13th century medieval illumination from a pauper's picture bible, the bearded old man always there measuring, dividing; the image of god as the architect of the world. Underneath this great edifice of a house we call the universe there is an old man or an old woman tinkering away – we may have just forgotten he or she is there. SGB

He has written the letter, sealed it up and taken off his spectacles – so the history of the world is already all signed and sealed. We will soon be hearing the news on that antique wireless. The Holy Spirit is ready to spring out of the cage, indeed is already half out. And yet the Creator kneels there hesitatingly, unsure whether actually to set light to the fire. It is a stark, comfortless world out there through the window. God knows that the Cross is there, waiting for his Son, whom he has put so affectionately on the mantelpiece with his mother. What will happen when he has lit the fire? Will he get back to his unfinished cup of coffee and his ancient typewriter and painstakingly hammer out (with two fingers) his plans for the future of the world? Will he ever get to sit on his chair? No doubt that mysterious, prescient cat knows the answer. But the cat keeps its counsel and lets the mysteries of the world unfurl. HW



The Potter

In this painting God is a potter. About 30 years ago I rather lost my way with painting so I took up potting instead; a different kind of making. I have not made pots for some time now – but I would like to take up the art again. I love collecting pots and know quite a few potters. The highly accomplished potter Peter Dick became a close friend of the family. He gave me a lot of encouragement with my own feeble attempts at potting. I have based the figure of God the Father on Peter. Elements of the composition are based on a 17th-century engraving of the potter at work on a primitive kick wheel – I found the image in a book on Alchemy I picked up in a second hand bookshop. I imagine Adam on the day of his creation as a rather hollow and fragile man – man made from clay and water, transformed in the kiln through the forced passage of air through fire. You can see that several attempts have been made already before the final Adam is fashioned. SGB

'I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, working at the wheel. And whenever the vessel he was working on came out wrong, as happens with the clay handled by potters, he would start afresh and work it into another vessel.' There they are, the various pots of different shapes and sizes. But the pot on which he is now working with such tender care is going to be special and unique. Will it be finished as male or female? Will it have eyes to see and a mouth to speak? Will the Holy Spirit hop off the roof and give it life? There is plenty more to be done and plenty of earth, air, fire and water, the elements out of which all is created. The Creator is content with his simple, Greek-tiled hut, but waiting to come are Cubist mountains, and, further off, the Tuscan peaks of a Renaissance landscape. HW



Naming the Animals

Two important pictorial sources of inspiration were from the Grabow Altarpiece by Master Bertram of Minden and the Holkham Picture Bible, now in the British Library. Both these 15th century works include depictions of the Creation of the Animals. I have combined the Creation of the Animals scene with the Genesis account of Adam naming the animals. Adam is struggling with his spelling in the early days in his education; I also suspect he is dyslexic. God is imagined as a beneficent toy maker moulding the animals from clay or Plasticine; but Adam is not satisfied by any of the models he is offered. The patient toy maker continues in his endeavour to create a companion for the discontent Adam. SGB

The Creator makes the animals, each on their little plinth, and Adam names them, making a careful note of the names on his note-pad. There is the owl, looking every inch the symbol of wisdom, and the cockerel, herald of the truth. Ominously, the two agents of evil, the serpent and the cat, lurking out of the limelight, have no such restrictions on their movement. The Creator is still shielding his latest, unfinished creation, but Adam is guessing that it will turn out to be a Pig. Most of the workshop is still in darkness – have the creatures not yet been released on the world? – but the luxuriant tree of life stands bright outside the window, while the holy Spirit, perched on the crossbar, keeps an eye both on the creation of the animals and on their future habitat in the world outside. The day is yet young – only five past nine – but the heavy tomes on the shelf suggest that the Creator has spent his evenings studying the correct ornithology and zoology for his products. HW



The Shaping of Eve

So much more wondrous is the figure of Eve; God cannot believe his own creation. The rounded forms and twists of the body are based on studies I made of Hindu Jain and Buddhist sculptures in the British Museum over thirty years ago. I was particularly charmed by a first century sandstone carving of a Yaksi from central India. The Yaksi I later discovered were guardians of treasures buried in the earth. So this seemed an appropriate figure to base my 'Eve' upon. I know practically nothing about Ancient Indian culture but marvel at the interpretation of the human figure in these sculptures. SGB

Is it to honour Eve that the Creator stands upright while he forms her? The welter of various tools betrays the care which has gone into her shaping. For all her modesty she is aware of her dignity and power as she looks steadily at her Creator. Will she one day aspire to equal that creative power? The serpent, curled and ready around the tree of life, has seen in her an opportunity and only waits till she is finished. Adam is lost in his post-operative slumber – the divine surgeon leaves no scar – happily unaware that he is leaning against a cross-bar ready for the Cross, with the nails and the hammer at the ready. At his feet the cat is eager to wake him to the realities of life, studiously ignoring the Madonna and Child tucked away on the opposite wall. HW



The Sabbath

When I was in my early teens I found Sunday afternoons a real struggle. There was homework to do, which I knew would not get done, and a sinking feeling of school the next day. We were not a sporty family but our garden was big enough for the distraction of badminton. When my maternal grandfather came to visit he always slept after lunch and we children had to be especially quiet. No exclamations or grunts of exertion even when playing badminton. The ennui but also the possible joy of the Sunday afternoon small town Berkshire back garden is a theme explored in Stanley Spencer's paintings. There are also some fantastic drawings and watercolours by David Jones of South London suburban gardens; a favourite of mine is a picture of a woman cleaning her bay windows whilst also keeping an eye on the neighbours. SGB

All is well, as the Creator dozes in his Sabbath-day rest in his floral arm-chair over his book. Creation is done and there are cup-cakes for tea and even a trace of cream in his cup of chocolate. Tools tucked away, no need for light in the table-lamp. Adam and Eve in their innocence relax in a game of badminton, fanned by the gentle zephyrs of spring. The model of man awaits its development on its own stand, like an artist's dummy, ready to be turned into the rich variety of human beings of the future. Madonna and Child are bright on the wall, he with his fingers raised in blessing, perhaps to bless that rich variety. The feline presence is very threatening, right in the middle of the picture, and ready to spring into destructive action. Can the Creator really afford to doze when those baleful eyes are fixed upon him? HW



The Pleasure-Garden of Eden

Cranach's workshop produced a number of versions of this scene; the one I know and I have looked at many times is in the Courtauld. When composing this image, I also had in mind 'The Fall' from the St Alban's Psalter. The illumination is one of the greatest achievements of English Romanesque painting – I only know it from a facsimile edition but I am still overwhelmed by the sheer ingenuity of the pictorial invention. I have set the scene in a back garden in Fulham. SGB

After the threat of that cat, it is a relief to find that all is well! Adam rather solemnly waters the garden, while Eve gathers a bouquet of flowers. Not only the luxuriant Tree of Life, with its gently-blowing zephyrs (reminding us of Botticelli's Primavera), dominates this cosy little Hortus Conclusus. As soon as a branch of the tree from the neighbouring garden ventures over the wall it springs into leaf. The cat looks suitably chastened, if not actually disappointed, as it impatiently bides its time, skulking precariously on the wall. It is reassuring to see the Creator contemplating his blank canvas as he considers what he should paint thereon. Perched on the window-sill the holy Spirit keeps an eye on both scenes, as Adam and Eve enjoy their protected and untroubled innocence. HW



The Fall

When drawing or painting, so many ideas and themes bubble up from pictures one has seen over a lifetime. This composition came very naturally without any conscious reference to other paintings. But I can see within it many echoes of pictures I have seen and loved in the past. One is Stanley's Spencer's painting of *Saint Francis Preaching to the Birds*; the green house and garden owe a debt to Edward Bawden and Eric Ravilious, and of course the birds and the figure of Yahweh to Uccello's Genesis frescos in the Green Cloister of the Santa Maria Novella, Florence. The rather sinister red dog reminds me of the Gauguin paintings where the dog embodies his malevolent spirit. The garden gate refers to a detail in a Dürer woodcut of Gethsemane. The setting itself is based on a sketch I made of a back garden of a house in Edinburgh where my son lived for a while. SGB

Who cut the hose? It echoes the broken aqueduct of Renaissance paintings. The secateurs still lie there guiltily discarded. And where is the other half of the apple? The cat has already contentedly taken possession of one of the chairs, while the other stands empty, coffee-cup untouched and garden-manual closed for ever. The guilty Adam and Eve vainly seek comfort in each other's embrace as they hide behind the bush under the baleful gaze of the red dog of passion. The chattering geese will soon give them away to the disappointed figure who is searching for them. The gnarled tree, stripped of its leaves, seems already to be pointing to the distant tower-blocks of the modern world. Is the flustered Spirit heading in the same direction? HW



Paradise Lost

The Expulsion fresco by Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel in the Church of the Santa Maria del Carmine in Florence is a terrifying image. Masaccio has stripped the image down to the bare essentials to express the vulnerability and humanity of Adam and Eve as they are driven out of paradise into a cold and challenging world. Mine is a busier image, relying on additional props to represent the story. What have Adam and Eve done that the angel and the landlord's dog have driven them out from the cosy warm interior of The Garden of Eden pub? They scurry off to work along anonymous London streets in the early morning. Traffic lights, road signs and the town hall clock will direct and mark their time. At night the electric red glow of the city sky will deny them the vision of the stars. In Vanbrugh's Church there is a painted wooden board with the Ten Commandments, the weekly order of what they can and cannot do. SGB

Now we really are already in the hum-drum of London city life, against the backdrop of St George's, Bloomsbury, and the clock tower of Lambeth Town Hall. Adam snatches his leg and his briefcase from the jaws of the hungry dog set on him by the implacable excluding angel. No more the comforts of the pub, no more the 'Fine Wines, Ales, Spirits', no more the mysterious figures glimpsed through the upstairs window. One page of history is already being trampled underfoot, and Adam holds the rest in his hand. Even the traffic signs and the wind-borne Spirit reinforce the message of exclusion. The woebegone serpent has no legs now, so has taken refuge in the narrow confines of the top deck of the London bus. No doubt the guilty pair will catch the bus before the light changes. As the barman calls time, the couple are cast out into a world limited and dominated by time. HW



The Life of Toil



This is beautifully depicted by Uccello in the fragment of the Genesis frescos in the Green Cloister of the Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Uccello has Cain and Abel as two chunky infants play-fighting. I have set the scene in the Hebrides – the cutting of the fish prefigures the violence to come. No longer a cultivated Garden but a place of great beauty where one can sense, in the abandoned crofts and collapsed stone walls, the precarious struggle for existence – of food gathered from stormy sea and stony field. In the remains of Hebridean villages there is a palpable sense of history and violence and in the injustice one man inflicts upon another. There is struggle and conflict written in the landscape; which one can read like a 15th-century painting or an Old Testament story. SGB

Adam harvests the generous seas and fruitful earth, but under the scorching sun and howling gales. Inside the house the ferocity of life is shown also by the roughness of Eve's slicing of the fish. Her humorous affection for the children is clear from her face, but Cain's failure to respond does not bode well for the future. Untouched by his mother's affection, unaware of his sleeping sibling, he has eyes only for the food! HW

Cain and Abel

There is a terribly poignant image in the *Picture Post* magazine of a man vainly digging his backyard during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Eve is hanging out clothes, which will never be dry or clean in the coal-wet urban drizzle. I combined this with a drawing I made after a tiny woodcut by Albrecht Dürer. The walled, cultivated Garden of Eden is replaced by the backyard of a brick, terraced house. There is fighting in the maze of alleyways and petty squabbles turn into catastrophic events. The traditional ass's jawbone has been picked up out of the spillage from the galvanised metal dustbin. SGB

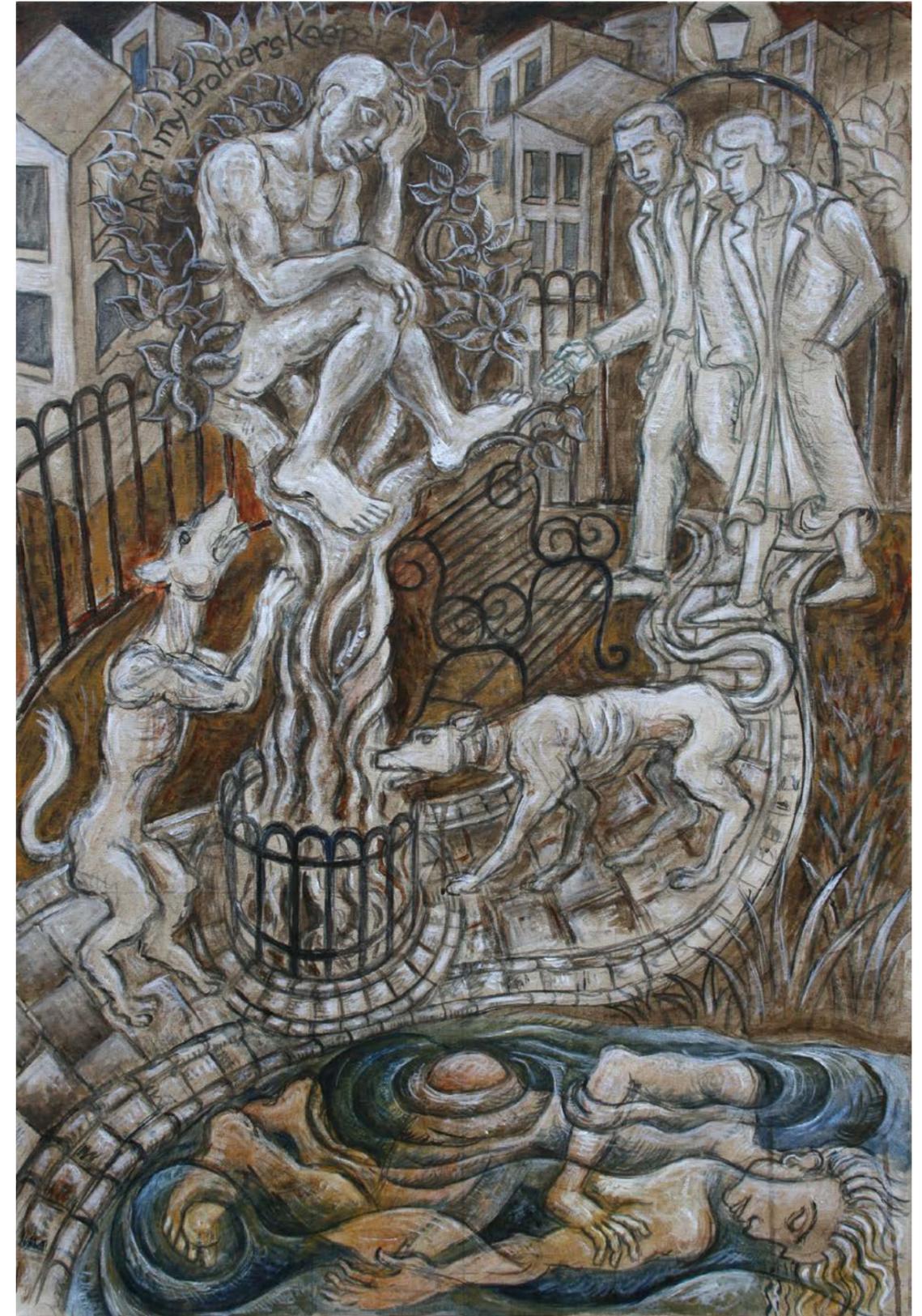
'When Adam dug and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?'; they sang at the Peasants' Revolt. In their diminutive garden there is barely room for Eve to hang out the washing. Even so, they have an ordered life in their suburban haven, protected from harsh realities by the firmly closed garden-door. Outside the wall the situation is far worse, as Cain batters Abel to death (like Samson) with the jawbone of an ass. Abel clutches the scroll of history, for it will not be the last instance of fraternal hatred and strife. The chaos is intensified by the howling dog at their feet and the rats making free of the dustbin. HW



The Repentance of Cain

A terrifying image; William Blake visualises the scene when Adam and Eve discover the body of Abel. This picture by Blake was one of the first paintings to show me how horror can be embodied in the beautiful. I have chosen the moments before the discovery of the slain body; Cain tortured by remorse futilely hides in the tree but the hounds have sought him out as Adam and Eve call to their son. The Blake painting is now thankfully once again on display in Tate Britain. Blake is father to the Modern British imagination and we should have permanent and ready access to his paintings – they sustain our collective spirit. SGB

Adam and Eve walk reflectively in the London park, while the body of their son floats, unnoticed, in the Serpentine. They may escape from high-rise buildings and street-lamps but they will find no peace. Cain, reduced to the unprotected nakedness of his guilt, may seek hiding in a tree, but the hounds of truth are baying at the base. Are they the hunter's dogs from T.S. Eliot's 'Choruses from the Rock', searching for truth? This conception avoids the melodramatic horror of William Blake's classic presentation. It draws the viewer to share Cain's total absorption in his remorse and hopeless loneliness. HW



The Building of the Ark

I have fond memories of Deptford where I have set this image; it is one of those places with a deep sense of layered history – Christopher Marlowe drinking in a bar; the Hawksmoor Church; centuries of shipbuilding. One Christmas two white swans on the muddy waters of Deptford Creek seemed like a magical apparition. I have always loved carpentry and had a part time job building adventure playgrounds in the Rotherhithe Surrey Docks area. The composition in this painting was in part inspired by the wood engravings by David Jones of the Chester Mystery Plays. I also had in mind Stanley Spencer's paintings of ship building on the Clyde, created during the Second World War. David Jones and Spencer rank amongst Britain's finest artists. SGB

While evil proliferates around him, Noah sets about building the ark. The seven deadly sins are not necessarily the classic seven. The guy in the top window couldn't care less, balanced by a scene of wild party-going. Below the first comes a cycle of violence, then mere frivolity, and in the centre at the bottom an ugly scene of mutual massacre. Over the bridge, grazed by the London bus and the tanker, go three mysterious figures by the light of the moon, perhaps Abraham's three visitors on their way to the city of vice at Sodom – represented by the inane merry-go-round of traffic in the corner of the picture. With his back to all that Noah (the Spirit perched encouragingly on his shoulder) is earnestly hammering away at his ark, whose size and complicated structure are merely hinted by the welter of ladders and steps surrounding it. HW



The Flood



Uccello's enigmatic depiction of Noah's Ark in the Santa Maria Green Cloister haunts the imagination. I was fascinated for many years by Uccello's *Deluge* from reproductions in books, but it was not until I was in my late twenties that I saw the real fresco for the first time. Thereafter I saw it every year through the annual Ampleforth History of Art trips to Florence. It never ceases to mesmerize – we are lured into Uccello's strange geometric imagination. In the Uccello painting a figure seems to seek refuge from the flood in a wine barrel. I have used a galvanised dustbin – a recurrent image in my own pictures – they remind me of the cartoon *Top Cat* (as child I wanted to be like Top Cat and live in a dustbin). I also have nostalgia for the sound of clattering metal bins being collected early in the morning – plastic wheelie bins lack the same romance. Melville's 'Moby-Dick' ends with Ishmael floating away on a wooden coffin, surviving the sinking of the whaling ship Pequod and the drowning of Captain Ahab; living to tell the tale of the conquering Leviathan. SGB

The umbrella, a futile attempt at protection when its holder is already up to his waist in the flood! Beside him a shrinking figure, vainly peering through his fingers like the doomed man hurtling to destruction in Michelangelo's Last Judgment. Idiotically he still clutches his safety-manual to ward off the rain. All the supports of civilisation have failed, as the water pours out of the empty windows of a high-rise building in the background – an earlier version of the Shard, perhaps. But again it is the animals who give the clue, the rats leaving the sinking ship, frantically scabbling up my back and onto my shoulder. The snug and compact ark sails away into the distance, safe and unattainable. HW

The Tower of Babel

I remember as a child the first time I saw a book of Bruegel reproductions. His image of the Tower of Babel is iconic – I consider Bruegel as another of my teachers in drawing as I spent hours copying engravings after his drawings. When I taught younger children I would set them the challenge of inventing their own fantastical tower set in panoramic landscape. The Babel image reminds us how small and incidental we are and how easily undone by pride. A collapsing tower and people falling from the sky – tragedies as real today as in biblical legend and Classical tale. How would Bruegel have depicted these events if he lived in our day? SGB

A Tower of Babel built entirely of books! What has this to say about the Wisdom of this world? We are already far above the high-rise buildings, colonnades and urban fly-over, with the pennant waving jauntily in the breeze, and only flying birds for company – unless their blackness suggests the Spirit fleeing the city. The builders are blissfully unaware of the perilously rickety construction as they enthusiastically continue adding information to information, doctoral thesis to doctoral thesis. One of them even takes time off to peer down – perhaps even to spit – on the city below, while the topmost builder has snatched a moment for a quick read of the book he is supposed to be building with. Over all hangs a desperate air of finality, of re-arranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic! HW



Abraham's Three Visitors

There is a beautiful etching by Rembrandt of the three angels visiting Abraham. In my early twenties I became obsessed with the etchings of Rembrandt; also the paintings. When I was an art student everyone was preoccupied with the idea of being contemporary – making art that was relevant, shocking and original. But a golden nugget of advice I received was to consider Rembrandt as a contemporary. Wise and true words. Another source of inspiration was the famous Andrei Rublev icon of the Holy Trinity – represented as the angels visiting Abraham. I developed my interest in Russian icon painting via the rather circuitous route of seeing the film on Rublev by the Russian director Tarkovsky – there was a memorable season of Tarkovsky films at the Ritzy in Brixton in the late 1970s, close to where I lived. SGB

Abraham on his ceaseless pilgrimage – his tent and Morris Traveller lurk in the valley below – offers his hospitality in the form of a cuppa brewed on his primus stove. There is no mistaking the messenger-function of the three visitors: feathered boots and sleeves and even a feather in the cap, with a cloak for parachute-landing, as well as a campervan in the background. A heavily pregnant Sarah smiles contentedly from the tent, reminding us of Rembrandt's Visit of the Three Angels. But there in the corner creeps in the black cat again: disaster threatens for Sodom. Can there never be unalloyed happiness? HW



Hagar and Ishmael



There is a wonderfully tender painting in the Dulwich Picture Gallery by Rubens of Hagar in the Wilderness. Rubens can be completely over-facing but in studies and the small works painted in his later years after his second marriage there is something deeply personal and heartfelt. I took solace from this painting, calling into the Dulwich Picture Gallery while cycling en route between Loughborough Junction and New Eltham to visit my grandmother. London could seem so grey and alienating – it seemed miraculous that a gem of a painting could be available a cycle ride away from Coldharbour Lane. I also managed to tick *Moby-Dick* off the list of must-read novels. ‘Call me Ishmael’ is the opening line – I read it one summer in a South London park. SGB

Abraham is driving off, leaving the waif Hagar disconsolate among the fading grandeur of the London streets. Decay is all around, in the form of rats and scavenging dog. She takes a moment to rest on a bench, there to be greeted by the angel emerging from the telephone box, a feather in his hat, a guitar on his back and an offering of flowers in his hand. The all-seeing eye of the telephone box and the holy Spirit on its roof signify their approval. There is hope, too, for the carefully-protected tree is ready to produce its fruit, while round the corner Ishmael, snug with his dog, is comforted by a mug of tea and a sandwich from the kiosk. The cyclist in the background could even be a cryptic signature of the artist, on his way to the Dulwich Picture Gallery. HW

The Sacrifice of Isaac

Many visits to Florence and hours spent looking at the panels for the Baptistery developed a curiosity and fascination with how you can represent this terrifying image. The dramatic realism of the Brunelleschi panel is a major watershed and anticipates the individuality and complexity of human emotion expressed in the developing Renaissance. As an art historian it is so easy to be preoccupied with questions and examination of style and to forget how horrific this image is.

The Ghiberti and Brunelleschi panels for all their stylistic and technical innovation follow the convention of including the ram caught in the tree. The device of depicting 'lamb chops on special offer' seemed to work in my painting. I do not know of any remaining butcher's shops in Central London – but then the scene is set in a London of my past.

For a while I stayed opposite the British Museum and on misty winter afternoons a chestnut seller with a long straggly beard would be there with his coke drum stove. He had the air of an Old Testament prophet – a sentry to the building, which holds so many images of the pagan gods. SGB

It looks as though Abraham is normally to be found roasting chestnuts on his mobile brazier. As he is about to sacrifice Isaac, out springs our ever-present friend, the Angel of the Lord, from the culvert to stay his hand. While Brunelleschi's Isaac kneels on the altar, willing but frightened, to receive the blow, here Isaac is slumped, passive and bound, on the market-trolley. Is that God the Father looking down indulgently from one upstairs window and the caged holy Spirit from another? For re-assurance the Jesse tree is flourishing round the corner, a guarantee of future generations. For a touch of black humour there will be enough lamb left over for the neighbouring butcher to make a special cheap offer. HW



Jacob's Ladder

The dreamer in the landscape is a recurrent image in British Art. The weary traveller falls in and out of a world of dreams and reality, the two worlds merge and interlace. Ladders provide another rich source of symbolic imagery; the ladder is also a useful formal device in pictorial composition, connecting different parts of a picture and providing a grid to structure space and form.

I was thinking of the dreaming figure in Samuel Palmer's visionary painting *The Valley Thick with Corn* now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. There is no ladder but there is a wooden barred gate, which takes our attention from the recumbent figure to the winding road, which in turn leads our eye up and out of the composition. Palmer in his Shoreham years created some of the greatest British art. I was also thinking of Bath Abbey and that wonderful architectural carving of Jacob's Ladder which adorns the west front.

I did not want to resort to winged angels; in this painting seagulls swoop down, as they do when a fishing boat is unloading its catch. The scene is based on an amalgam of sketches made of Devon, Cornish and Scottish fishing ports. You might recognise some the features and also know that there was always a pub very nearby. SGB

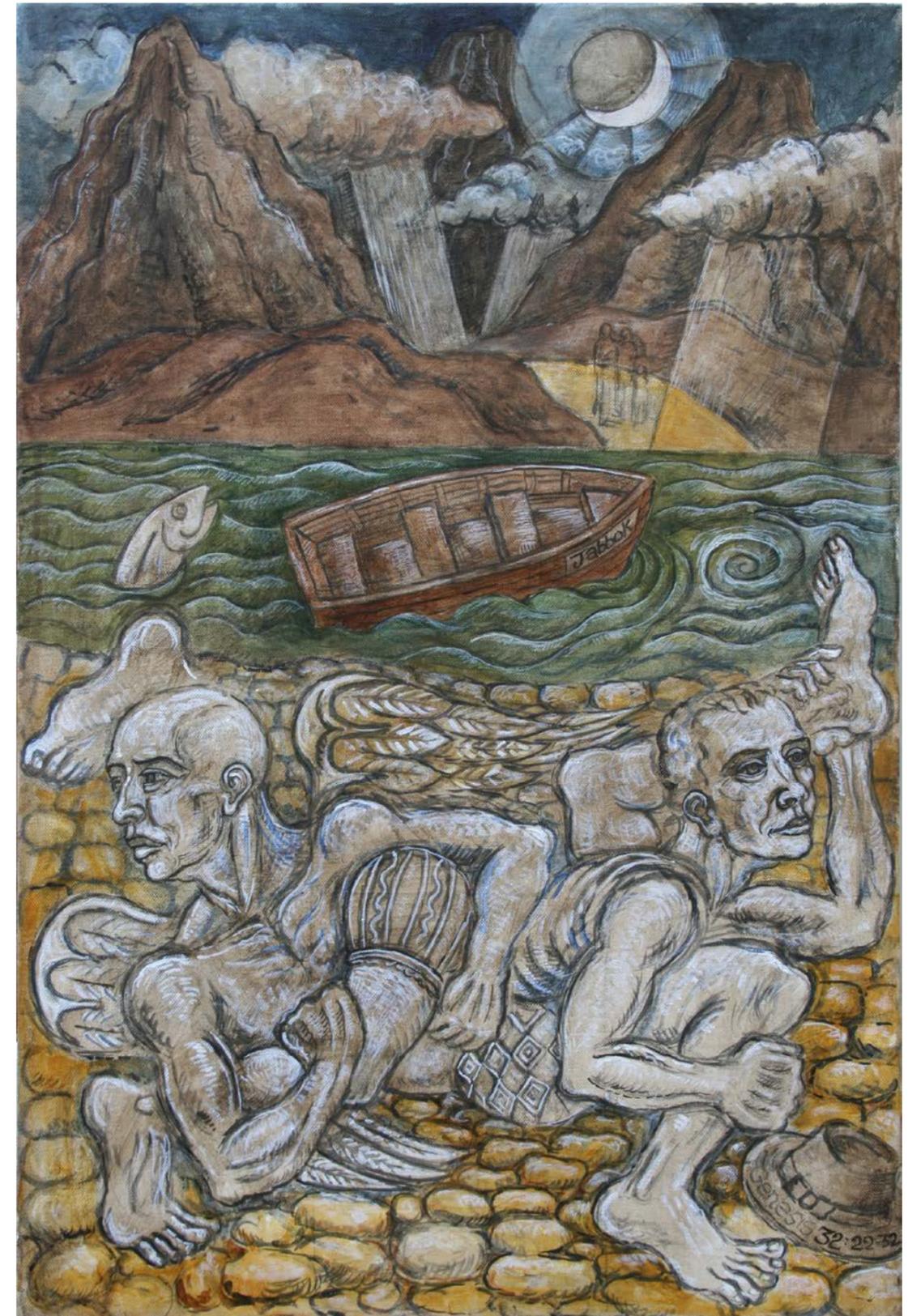
With his canine companion Jacob has travelled not to Bethel but to Cornwall. The village street leads sharply down to the shore by a series of steps. Appropriately, Jacob dreams of baskets of fish being carried up the ladder. Are they the Christians who 'will see greater things than this' (John 1.51)? Jacob sleeps soundly on the cobbles after his exertions on the fishing-expedition. A positive flurry of winged creatures flits up and down the ladder, bringing him messages, though one of the birds could not resist the temptation to investigate the fish, and another seems sorely tempted. HW



Jacob at the Crossing of the River Jabbok

In a tiny part of a Mughal miniature, two wrestlers are locked in a combative embrace; I made a sketch of this detail during a visit to an exhibition at the British Library. I was fascinated by the compositional device of forming one body out of two and the unity of the figures reminded me of a crab, an ancient creature existing between sea and land. In the ceaseless battle between man and angel on a shoreline the two beings become one. Sketchbooks are the repository of images and ideas that may be used years later. The scene is taken from an evocative view of the mountains of the Morvern peninsula seen from Lismore – it was too wet to make a sketch from anything except memory. SGB

No dog or cat dares to be present at this epic struggle of Jacob with the Angel of the Lord – the powers of light, the powers of darkness, the ancient river-sprite? It is the awesome moment of Jacob's conversion, when he comes to know the Lord. Here they struggle, grappling and unconquered; who will be the victor? Jacob's family wait on the other side, half-seen amid storm, lightning and eclipse, while the ferry-boat drifts unheeded between the two, guarded only by a perky, monstrous fish. HW



Joseph interprets Pharaoh's Dream

Joseph is the great dreamer and interpreter of dreams. In the nursery rhyme 'Hey Diddle Diddle the Cat and the Fiddle' we have a cow that jumps over the moon. In the jumble of my mind I have linked cows and cats with dreams; perhaps because my own sleep has been interrupted by our numerous cats nibbling my toes and the cattle, which on occasions in the early hours, have broken into our cottage garden and munched our plants and flowers. We associate cats, cattle, and dream prophecy with Ancient Egypt. Does the 'Hey Diddle Diddle' nursery rhyme have its routes in this Biblical tale? This is of course a fanciful idea with no scholarly foundation, but an enticing theme for further picture making. I am now working on a series of paintings called Apocryphal Biblical Tales and Nursery Rhymes. SGB

There lies Pharaoh, duly mummified as a good Egyptian should be, with his hands crossed over his chest as a good Christian should have them. The Islamic slippers are a nice touch! The psychiatrist Joseph sits patiently at his side, perhaps contemplating the meaning of the dream. In the ghostly half-light of the waxing moon we see one of the seven lean cows devouring one of the seven fat ones, against the background of a pyramid – a presage of the lean years which will devour all the substance stockpiled during the productive years. What is Joseph meditating so secretively? His own high position? The revenge on his brothers? Bringing the family to join him in Egypt? The future story of Israel? Who knows! HW



Commentary on the Genesis stories

DOM HENRY WANSBROUGH OSB

The Creator

The stories of the early chapters of *Genesis* are not intended to be historical accounts of what happened at the dawn of time. They are analyses of the human condition, our human condition, its greatness and its weakness, in story form. The chief purpose of the first of the two creation stories is to show the total dependence on the Creator of the universe we know. It is divided into a logically progressive series of six ‘days’ in order to show that the Jewish Sabbath, every seventh day devoted to God, is part of the natural order of the world.

The Big Bang 1:1–5

Every believer in the Abrahamic tradition of revelation, whether Jew, Christian or Muslim, has a personal picture of these religious truths. No Jew or Muslim would dare to try to represent the Creator pictorially. Perhaps we dare to do so because Jesus told us to call God our Father. Perhaps the formula which has most lent itself to such Christian representations is ‘the Ancient of Days’, that mystic expression used in the King James version of the *Book of Daniel*, in startling contrast to the Greco-Roman tradition, which pictured the eternal youth of their divinities.

The Potter 2:26–27, 2:7

In *The Bible*, God is frequently represented as a potter, making things as he will. Created things have no grounds for complaint that they would have preferred to be other, no more than the pots shaped by a potter. One of the most striking of these uses is in the Prophet Jeremiah, who, on the eve of the Babylonian Exile, sees that some pots

are good and some bad. Israel cannot flatter itself that it is necessarily a good pot.

Naming The Animals 2:19–20

The first creation story teaches that Adam is made in the image of God. He is God’s steward of creation. One of the consequences of this is that he must continue and preserve God’s work of creation. The most immediate task is to complete the creation of the lower animals by naming them. Until something is named we are not sure what is its concept. Giving it a name makes it into something recognizable, a real thing.

The Shaping of Eve 1:26–27, 2:21–25

Each of the two creation stories makes clear that the companionship of man and woman is part of the natural order of things. ‘Adam’ is the name of the human creature. In the first story it is stressed ‘in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them’. In the second story Adam can find no adequate companionship among all the creatures, so God creates a companion out of Adam’s own rib. This in no way signifies inferiority but implies that the two are of the same stuff.

The Sabbath 2:1–3

According to the first story the seventh day is the day on which God himself rests, and it is the day dedicated to God, a day also of leisure and ‘family time’. Why seven? Abraham came from Mesopotamia, where the moon was worshipped. The twenty-eight day cycle of the moon gave us our four-week month. Sixty seconds in a minute and sixty minutes in an hour came from there too!

The Pleasure-Garden of Eden 2:8–17

The carefree pleasure-garden of Eden presents not what once was the case, but what should be the case. The ancients represented the ages as steadily declining: gold, silver, bronze, etc. until the idea of progress reversed the imaginative process, putting the ideal as something to be attained finally. So the unembarrassed nakedness of man and woman is a symbol of their openness and confidence in each other. There is no disorder and no threat in the garden. No threat either to or from their animal companions, for meat-eating begins only after the Flood.

The Fall 3:1–13

Once disorder enters in, everything goes awry. But God does not give up on his human creatures. He seeks them out and covers their embarrassment, himself sewing clothes for them. *The Bible* does not tell us what the ‘first’, that is, the basic sin was. Obviously it included disobedience, and the proud decision that they could make their own rules in defiance of God’s provisions for them: they will be like gods. Some have thought that the erect shape of the serpent suggests a sexual disorder. Others opine that other stories too were once independent accounts of the origin of sin, for example the story of Cain and Abel presenting jealousy as the basic sin.

*Paradise Lost and
The Life of Toil 3:16–24*

Disorder brings its own penalties. For the human couple there is no more living as though the harmony remained perfect. It is the disorder which gives human toil its sting. If there were perfect confidence and no fear, would even child-bearing be an unalloyed joy? The serpent, once a noble dragon (the same word in Greek), loses its legs and has the humiliation of being no more than a large worm, slithering along the ground. But the unique factor of the Hebraeo-Christian worldview is the promise that evil will not ultimately prevail: the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent.

*Cain and Abel and
The Repentance of Cain 4:1–16*

This may be an alternative story of the origin of evil, proposing that disorder is the result of jealousy. Cain shatters the most sacred of all bases of society, family unity, and to this adds violence and lying. He is sent into exile, to wander over the face of the earth. This may be a way of explaining how humanity, originating in a single pair, became scattered over the earth. Although he is punished for his sin, God does not reject him, but in sympathy limits his vulnerability (in a nomadic society strangers have no protection) by setting a mark on him, thus showing that all humanity, even sinful humanity, is treasured by God’s care. There is no explicit equivalent in *The Bible* of the scene on which the Repentance of Cain is built.

*The Building of the Ark and
The Flood 6:1–7:24*

A story of a massive flood, by which God swept away and cleansed the world of evil, occurs in many cultures, and the Mesopotamian plain around Babylon is in particular subject to annual flooding. In the Book of Genesis some misbehaviour between ‘the sons of God’ and ‘the daughters of men’ seems to have been the last straw which persuaded God to rid the world he had created of all evil. Only Noah and his family were to survive and re-people the world.

The Tower of Babel 11:1–9

The last of the stories of the origin of evil again involves pride, this time a collective pride. The inhabitants of the city set out to reach heaven by their own efforts. The story may be based on the ziggurats or worship-towers which still survive from the ancient civilizations in several places on the Mesopotamian plain. In the biblical story God stymies their efforts by imposing different languages on them, so that they can no longer understand one another or work together. It is also a story to explain the origin of different languages.

Abraham’s Three Visitors 18:1–15

With the story of Abraham *The Bible* enters a new phase. The early chapters of Genesis recount myths which have no historical value. Their value lies in the picture they give of God, the world and human nature. The story of Abraham, by contrast, does have a historical basis. This should not, to be sure, be measured by the canons of modern historical writing. It is folk-history, passed down by word of mouth, and coloured by other traditional elements, such as aetiological stories, stories which are not historical, but give popular explanations of names, customs, features of life or landscape traditional in the folk-memory.

The story of Abraham’s visitors shimmers between a visitation by God, by the Angel of the Lord (often a vehicle of the divine will) or by a triad of messengers. The purpose of the visit is to give the message that Sarah, though long past the normal age of child-bearing, is at last to fulfil God’s promise of a son and heir to Abraham. A further message is that Sodom is to be destroyed for its wicked behaviour.

Hagar and Ishmael 21:9–21

Seeming unable to bear a child, Sarah had previously put into Abraham’s embrace her slave-girl, Hagar, as a surrogate. She bore Abraham a child, Ishmael, but then upset Sarah by her cockiness. Sarah duly demanded that she be sent away, and so she was. Traditionally Ishmael became the father of the other Semitic nations.

The Sacrifice of Isaac 22:1–19

This heart-rending story tells the tale of the ultimate test of Abraham’s trust in the Lord. In the Jewish tradition Isaac voluntarily accepted his role in obedience to his father’s and the Lord’s command, and put forth his own hands to be bound. Christian tradition sees this as a preparation for Christ’s own offering to his Father. Child-sacrifice was widely practised in the neighbouring peoples, and this story may be a way of showing that it must never occur again.

Jacob’s Ladder 28:11–19

On his journey to find a wife Jacob had this vision of a dual-carriageway of communication to heaven as he slept on the stone at Bethel. It is the foundation-legend of the great stone in the ancient sanctuary at Bethel – and ‘Bethel’ means ‘House of God’. In the Gospel of John Jesus alludes to this two-way communication with heaven as a foretaste of the Christian revelation, an open channel of God’s love.

*Jacob at the Crossing of the River Jabbok
32:22–33*

This mysterious account of Jacob’s encounter with the Angel of the Lord in the form of a river-sprite at the crossing of the great River Jabbok is the story of Jacob’s conversion. No longer is he a trickster, cheating his brother out of his birthright and his uncle of his flocks, but henceforth he has a new name and nature, Israel, or ‘Man Seeing God’. The struggle also provides the rationale for the taboo on eating the sciatic nerve.

Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s Dream 41:16–36

The story of Joseph brings the Book of Genesis to a close, recounting the move of Abraham’s family down to Egypt in preparation for the story of Moses and the Exodus and Covenant. In *The Bible* the Wisdom literature of Egypt plays a considerable part, but the story of Joseph shows this unlettered captive outgunning the sages of Egypt in wisdom and understanding. It is a classic story of rags-to-riches, or the way in which the Lord protects and inspires his own. By his outrageous teasing he even gets his own back on his brothers who sold him into slavery in the first place.



Stephen Guyon Bird

‘We all make sense of the world through stories and the way I recount stories is through drawing, working in cycles of imagery often related to literary and mythological themes. For me drawing is the architecture of the imagination; it’s about reconfiguring the stories known to us all, simply through putting marks down on paper, board or canvas.’ SGB

STEPHEN G. BIRD is a visual storyteller; he tells stories through the pictures he makes. He draws from life and from landscape, but many of his works are narrative in nature.

In his paintings a mermaid rides her Lambretta through the docklands; Salome dances in a downtown bar; archangels walk the city streets and Jonah meets the Leviathan in the Thames. In many of his works there are references to the early saints and parables, Classical myths and legends – many set in pre-boom London including Deptford pubs, rooms in Lambeth, red pillar boxes, Routemaster buses, bicycles and scooters. Other paintings are set on the rugged coastline of north Devon, or a Scottish island – places Stephen returns to every year.

They are not illustrations as such, though some of the pictures relate more clearly than others to a familiar narrative. Others invite viewers to invent their own story in response to the image.

Stephen G. Bird studied fine art at Chelsea College of Art and then Goldsmiths in London from the mid-1970s to the early 80s. When Stephen lived in London he returned again and

again to the British Museum, drawing Classical and Oriental sculptures. He also spent many hours in the Drawing and Print Room making close studies of Renaissance master prints and drawings. He continues to draw every day and these daily studies into the language of drawing have formed the bedrock of his narrative pictures.

For most of his working life he has been Head of Art and the History of Art at Ampleforth College, but alongside his teaching draws and paints daily. Consequently he has a formidable collection of sketchbooks, drawings, paintings and prints though he has chosen to exhibit only latterly, with a number of one-man shows over the last few years.

Over the last two decades his painting has developed a singular, evocative style based on layers of colour, strong line drawing, pattern and closely woven composition. The works are full of wit as well as darker undercurrents.

In 2005 Stephen G. Bird was awarded a Scholarship with the Farmington Institute, Oxford to explore the iconography of the



Last Judgement which culminated in the creation of a large-scale polyptych. In 2013 he was awarded a second Farmington Scholarship to create a series of paintings based on stories from the *Book of Genesis*.

Drawing is at the very heart of his work. A world of familiar, knowable, homely objects is clearly delineated – a rug by the fire, a bath, teapot, cat, table, chair. The images often tell of a life lived through domestic ritual, the sacrament of the everyday – genre painting of a kind.

Yet many narratives break through these domestic themes lending resonance to the mundane.

References in the work to Giotto and Uccello, as well as many other medieval and early Renaissance artists, are evident. The visionary nature of the images also shows the influence of William Blake and Samuel Palmer and 20th century British narrative painters such as Stanley Spencer and David Jones.

Above all his works express a preoccupation with the mechanics of drawing and painting and the new worlds that can be created simply through putting marks down on paper, board or canvas.