Marc Chagall is an important 20th century artist who worked in a number of media – painting, print, tapestry, stained windows … He was born in the 1880’s in what is now Belarus, but was then part of the Russian empire ruled by the czar. Chagall left home – a town called Vitebsk – when he was in his late teens; he had grown up in a pretty orthodox Jewish household, but didn’t keep practicing his religion very much after he left Vitebsk. His Jewish background remained very important to him, and was one of the reasons he said yes to the “Bible Series” commission in the 1930’s. The last print (it was a series of 105 prints) was done in the 1950’s.

1. One of the etchings I’d like you to look at is entitled “The Creation of Man.” From your reading of the creation stories in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, you know that this particular scene isn’t actually in the creation accounts. Chagall is remembering some stories he would have heard as a child, stories that are sort of “continuations” of the biblical narratives. (Sort of like Milton – some of what is in Paradise Lost isn’t in the Bible, but is in stories that grew up to fill in the gaps in the biblical narrative – the story of the battle between the angels, for example.) Chagall would have heard a story when he was growing up about how God, when he decided to create the human, sent angels to gather the necessary dirt from the four corners of the world. It is also possible that Chagall, who had grown up in an observant orthodox Jewish household, would have hesitated to depict God – something that Jewish artists don’t do. The colors that are applied here are unique to every print – I mean, Chagall had to go back and hand color every print that come off the press. Can you say anything about his choice of colors? You can wait and make that assessment after you’ve seen more etchings!

2. In Chagall’s The Dove of the Ark, Noah looks a lot like Sean Connery! But that isn’t why I asked the Haggerty folks to bring this out of the vault! On Tuesday, in Dr. Krueger’s class, you read some lines of Tennyson’s poem, in Memoriam, in which a dove is mentioned; Tennyson is certainly leaning on the story here. Read Genesis 8:6-12. Why is the dove something significant in Chagall’s etching?

3. Read Genesis 18:1-15; then take a look at Chagall’s etching, Abraham and the Three Angels. Chagall is making an assumption in his etching, one that is not text-based. Can you see what this is?

4. Genesis 22 is one of the most discussed stories in the Old Testament – go ahead and read the chapter. Dr. Krueger mentioned the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, in class, on Tuesday – his book Fear and Trembling is all about Genesis 22; it is four different re-tellings of the story, each with a different viewpoint. In the first version, Abraham decides to kill Isaac in accordance with God’s will. Abraham convinces Isaac
that he is doing this by his own will, not God’s. In the second version, Abraham sacrifices a ram instead of Isaac, but even though God spares Isaac, Abraham’s faith is irredeemably shaken by the fact that God would ask him to do such a thing. In the third version, Abraham decides not to sacrifice Isaac, then prays to God for forgiveness for having even considered sacrificing his son in the first place. And finally, in the fourth version – Abraham can’t go through with killing Isaac, so this starts Isaac questioning his faith. These would seem to cover all the bases – can you see any other viewpoint on the situation that isn’t covered by Kierkegaard?

5. Chagall has an etching entitled Jacob’s Ladder, on display here. This etching has its background in Genesis 28 – read that chapter, verses 1-19. Jacob is one of the two sons of Rebekah and Isaac, so he is the grandson of Abraham. In the course of the stories in Genesis about him, he fathers, through four women, 12 sons who become, according to the biblical texts, the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. What might be the theological significance of Jacob’s dream? And – who do you think the upside down figure is, hovering over Jacob’s head?

6. Look now at the etching of “The Burning Bush.” Above the burning bush you see four Hebrew characters. Re-read Exodus, chapter 3, vv. 13-16. What are these four Hebrew characters – I mean, what do they represent?

7. Also in the Burning Bush etching – read Exodus 34, vv. 29-33. (This story comes after the Golden Calf incident, when Moses comes down and sees the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, so he breaks the first set of tablets he received – in Exodus 34, he’s picking up the second set.) How has Chagall represented this biblical story, and specifically this part, in his Burning Bush (a little bit “before the fact”!)?

8. Take a look at the etching entitled “Moses Receives the Tablets of the Law.” The writing on the tablets is in Hebrew, of course. According to tradition, manifest in both Christian and Jewish art, what part of the Sinai Covenant is written on the “Tablets of the Law”? Notice here that Chagall, once again, avoids depicting God in his entirety. What does he do, instead? And – remember how Dr. Krueger mentioned Tennyson’s idea of “power in darkness”? This is one of the biblical passages that talks about God cloaking himself, on Mt. Sinai, in cloud.
9. Speaking of the Tablets of the Law – it’s sort of interesting that in the story of the first giving of the Tablets, in Exodus 31, v. 18, GOD does the writing on the tablets and the giving of them. In the second story, in Exodus 34, after the people worship the Golden Calf and Moses breaks the tablets (see the etching, “Moses Breaking the Tablets), the second set (Exodus 34, vv. 27-28) are written by Moses. What might this mean, theologically?

10. We skipped over a number of pretty important stories, in the Old Testament – but we had to! Read Joshua 3:1-17, about the crossing of the Jordan. If we are going to give this a time frame, it would be around 1200 B.C. Notice that there’s a “parting of the waters” that occurs here – Joshua is being designated the successor of ________, who is also known for parting of waters! Just an observation: this “Ark of the Covenant” that is mentioned in the narrative – it’s basically a box carried on poles (think the last scene of “Raiders of the Lost Ark,” if you ever saw that). In Chagall’s etching, it ISN’T depicted like that – Chagall is remembering countless hours spent in synagogue when he was a kid, looking at the Torah curtain that covered the niche that contained the synagogue’s Torah scroll. So, when he thinks “Ark,” he remembers this Torah curtain ….

11. I through a random etching of David and Goliath in here – we’ll come back to this, later in the semester, I just want you to have a visual!

12. One of the etchings is called “Elijah ascends to Heaven.” More stories we had to skip! Elijah is a prophet, but not one who has a book named after him, like Isaiah or Amos or Micah. His time period would be around 800 B.C. – so, a couple of hundred years after David, when the twelve tribes have split into two different kingdoms, Judah (the south, where the Davidic king reigns) and Israel, in the north. Read 2 Kings, chapter 2, vv. 7-13. What is the long stretch of blue we see in the etching? What is the smaller splotch of blue? What does the latter represent, in both the etching and in the story? (A hint about this smaller splotch: have you ever heard the expression, “to take up someone’s mantle,” in the sense of to take up someone’s responsibilities or position? It comes from here.) Elijah is hitting the water, and it divides, then Elisha hits the water, and it divides. This is not a coincidence: Elijah is being connected with whom? And Elisha follows in his footsteps!

13. The prophet Isaiah, who lived in the southern kingdom of Judah, in Jerusalem, wrote about 700 B.C. One of Chagall’s etchings comes from his book (“Messianic Times”). Read Isaiah, chapter 11, vv. 1-9. How is Chagall interpreting the “little boy” (in some translations, “little child”) of verse 6? What is your clue?

14. The prophet Jeremiah (lived around the end of the 600’s, beginning of the 500’s, B.C.) does have a book named for him – it’s pretty long. Read Jeremiah, chapter 1, vv. 1-10.
Look at the etching, “Jeremiah receives the gift of prophecy,” which is based on this story. How has Chagall changed the story, slightly, in his etching? Why might he have done this?

15. "Ezekiel’s Vision” is pretty odd – Ezekiel was a prophet who lived most of his life in Babylon, where he had been taken in 597 B.C., at the start of the Babylonian Exile. Read Ezekiel, chapter 1, vv. 1-14. Some people have tried to maintain that Ezekiel saw a UFO – but probably he was just influenced by the statues and paintings and carvings he was seeing in Babylon. No question, here – but we’ll be coming back to this vision, so I wanted you to get a look at it!