

## Photography's Old Testament Humanity

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David Mach (1956-) is a Scottish artist known mainly for his large sculptural installations. However in 2011 at the City Art Centre in Edinburgh, Mach's exhibition *Precious Light* brought together over 40 large-scale photographic collages on biblical themes. A celebration of the 400th anniversary of the King James translation of the Bible, his Old Testament subjects included Noah's ark building, the tower of Babel, Moses, the plagues in Egypt, Jonah, and Daniel.

Here in *Jacob's Ladder*, photography's habit of dealing in the detail of the real is used to portray the episode of Jacob's other-worldly dream in Genesis 28. It is far from a philosophical or abstracted treatment of the numinous, and in this sense, Mach reflects something of the Hebrew Bible's avoidance of dualism. As much as the dream-report features in the text as a supernatural event, study of Hebrew narrative has shown that no such departure from reality is suggested: its other-worldly subject and the protagonist viewpoint of the dream is realised and anchored within the

details of Jacob's journey such as his lying down and the immediate vicinity of place. Further, the direct experience of the divine is followed by a similarly dramatic reorientation of, and consequence for, Jacob himself: the promise of an abundance of descendants and the building of a holy monument (Gen 28:18) are a material flourishing, and a direct (horizontal) result of the divine (vertical) experience. That which is 'mythical' and transcendent, while it may well be interior and dreamlike, is also made manifestly material and concrete.

This is true of Mach's piece in that the figures are doused with the clutter and texture of their clothes and possessions. While we may not see their conscious reaction, the material erupts as if to supplement for this: coins, diamonds and stars (from an American flag emblem) act out an explosion of physical blessing. Indeed, this element may visually recall the myth of Zeus appearing to Danaë in the form of a shower of gold coins, where seduction and consumption leads to a consummation through the material. Hence the divine axis is corporeally located with real-world subjects and places, firmly aligning with the Bible in its 'scandal of particularity' and humanity. It is a criss-crossing poetics of narrative, a 'poetics of manoeuvring between the truth and the whole truth'.

Another contemporary photographer, Adi Nes (1966-) also turns photography's lens on the Bible, though depicting one or two biblical characters rather than Mach's crowd scenes. His staging of the fourteen-piece *Biblical Stories*



**This page:**

Adi Nes  
*Abraham and Isaac*,  
 2004; chromogenic  
 print, 100cm x 100cm.  
 Image adines.com

**Facing page:**

David Mach  
*Jacob's Ladder*, 2011;  
 collage on board,  
 244cm x 208cm. Image  
 davidmach.com

**Previous page:**

David Roberts, *The  
 Departure of the  
 Israelites*, 1829; oil on  
 canvas, 119cm x 212cm.  
 Birmingham Museums  
 Trust.



series (2003-2006) is orchestrated in real space, rather than on the surface with cut-outs, but he is similarly concerned with a cinematic unveiling of the biblical story into some kind of resonance with the present. Most like Mach here, his decision to focus on the Bible (in this case a selection of twenty-one Old Testament figures) led to a realisation of humanity's depth and breadth; he has said that the project emerged from a series of self-negations:

When I started the project... I wondered what happens after everything's been erased. If I ignore that I'm gay, I ignore that I grew up in a Sephardic family, I ignore that I grew up in a development town, I ignore that I'm an artist - what is the main thing in my own identity? I thought that the first layer that would exist is Judaism - that I can't run away from my Jewish identity. But when I finished the project, I found a different answer. I found that humanity, friendship, and being generous and compassionate, these are the last things that I have as a human being.

Instead of Mach's biblical lens on cacophonous humanity, Nes' photographs reveal a more settled humanity, albeit one sharpened by (though not erased by) societal edges of poverty, homelessness, and homosexuality. All of the *Biblical Stories* images are set in the suggested 'wastelands' of his home city Tel Aviv, whether roadside benches, dingy underpasses or a soup kitchen, and some such as *Untitled (David and Jonathan)* evoke the gendered aspects of same-sex friendships. This contemporaneity employs what Nissim

Gal has called a 'neo-biblical', 'midrashic framework' for making photographs:

Nes is not interested in turning distress into the theatrical or in turning social and urban violence against the homeless into a performance, but in identifying in nomadic life a performative alternative to the spectacular society.

In this, the Judaic patriarchy (and matriarchy, since we also meet Ruth) is of real, heterogenous, human substance and is the enabling and celebration of such, 'restoring faith to the world'.

**Texts cited (for details see the full article below):**

J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (1991)  
 Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (1992)  
 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1987)

Adi Nes in the pamphlet 'Adi Nes: Biblical Stories', Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University (2008).

Nissim Gal, 'The Language of the Poor: Bible Stories as a Critical Narrative of the Present', *Images: Journal of Jewish Art and Visual Culture*, 4:1 (January 2010), pp.82-108.

Extracts from Sheona's article 'The Bible as Photo-collage and Tableau: David Mach's *Precious Light* series (2011)', in the *Bible in the Arts*, Issue 3 (2019).

