

# From Bak to the Bible: Imagination, Interpretation, and Tikkun Olam

*Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips*

An exhausted refugee collapses atop a rubble heap in a bombed-out building, enveloped by war-shattered residue: wrecked furniture, discarded kitchen utensils, dilapidated shoes, rent blankets, broken beams—detritus of a human world gone up in smoke. He reaches out, Adam-like, toward a vacant silhouette of Michelangelo's Father-God. Only the divine hand remains, an amputated placard tacked to a perforated wall. A vista of destruction appears beyond the remains. Both man and god-shape are framed by artillery shells and rifle; blank walls, canvas, scroll, book, and tablets; a tethered cross shrouded with prayer shawls; and smoke-laced skyline.

## ABOUT THIS ARTICLE

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Samuel Bak, *Creation of Wartime III*, 1999-2008. Oil on canvas, 50 x 75 inches. Collection #BK1243.

Michelangelo's God ceiled an orderly universe in the Sistine Chapel; here he has been blasted into thin air, traced only by broken bricks, propped split timbers, crematoria smoke wafting its question toward heaven, and elusive double *yods* (“”) signifying the unspeakable biblical name of a bodiless god. Exiled from vaulted holy space, this deity breaches wall, promise, covenant, perhaps morality itself; leaving behind Adam in a wholly different universe of meaning.

Thus we are thrust into the artistic terrain of Samuel Bak,<sup>1</sup> where intimate worlds, grand landscapes, symbolic narratives, and personal artifacts have been destroyed, yet provisionally reassembled. *Creation of Wartime III* is one of many of Bak's works that reappropriate classic Christian representations of creation. Scenes of destruction and construction, of tentative survival, of tenuous restoration, Bak's reimaginings parallaxically shift the focus from the world's creation to a world in need of mending, offering precarious representations of *tikkun olam*, the rabbinic notion of “repairing of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

A child prodigy who, at age nine, held his first exhibition in the Vilna ghetto, and whose painting now spans seven decades, Bak weaves together personal history, Jewish history, Christian history, and Western art history to fashion a visual narration and narrative vision of his experience of Shoah and life lived in the shadow of crematoria chimneys. His narrative tapestry is rich with threads of paradox, irony, and reverse patterning. In *Creation of Wartime III*, “new creation” is tainted by apocalypse; ruination serves as marker for divinity; *Müsselman* is proxy for the newborn human; books, scrolls, and tablets lie unwritten; canvases go unpainted; pointing fingers signal no clear direction—death in life, life in death, *deathlife*.<sup>3</sup> Bak works with the rubble of ruptured stories where plots no longer progress tidily from birth through life to death. Life and death “are no longer opposites or alternatives, but co-exist with a painful intimacy that alters our way of seeing the self in relation to history.”<sup>4</sup>

Art and suffering, like life and death, are well-known companions. Jewish philosopher and biblical translator Franz Rosenzweig has observed that art “aggravates the suffering of life and at the same time helps people to bear it,” teaching “us to overcome with-out forgetting.” Far from erasing trauma or obscuring injury, art overcomes by “structuring suffering, not by denying it. The artist knows himself as he to whom it is given to say what he suffers. . . . He tries neither to keep the suffering silent nor to scream it out: he represents it. In his representation he reconciles the contradiction, that he himself is there and the suffering also is there; he reconciles it, without doing the least debasement of it.”<sup>5</sup> In similar but more graphic terms, Bak says his art aspires “to protect the scar of an ancient wound while remaining true to [the] knowledge of the wound itself.”<sup>6</sup>

Implicit in Bak's observation are the narrative qualities and disruptive effects of suffering as well as his own sense of obligation as an artist to bear witness.<sup>7</sup> In narrative terms the wound marks the critical event that forever

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## NOTES

1. For a representative selection of Samuel Bak's recent work see [http://puckergallery.com/samuel\\_bak.html](http://puckergallery.com/samuel_bak.html).
2. The expression *tikkun olam* evokes the ancient Jewish sense of responsibility for social justice. It has more recent spiritualized roots in Kabbalistic thought.
3. This is Lawrence Langer's term for describing the psychological experience of “dying while living” encountered in the testimony of Holocaust survivors. See *Using and Abusing the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
4. Lawrence Langer, “The Holocaust Theme in the Paintings of Samuel Bak,” in *Samuel Bak Retrospective 1946-1997* (Bad Frankenhausen, Germany: Panorama Museum, 1998), 137.

changes “what the past was supposed to lead up to” and opens up a future that “is scarcely thinkable.” Wounds of catastrophic proportion—for example, critical illness or injury, death of a child, war, genocide, natural catastrophe—leave individuals and communities with scarce resources for comprehending who they are and what they are to become. Like Bak's Adam, survivors find themselves in the midst of what one theorist terms “narrative wreckage,” namely, the collapse of all coherence to life.<sup>8</sup> The survivor's challenge, therefore, is to take stock of the remains, to select the viable remnants, and to engage the arduous task of reconstructing a new story that seeks to repair and reorder both self and community.

Stories of suffering, because partial and provisional, must be revisited frequently. New circumstances, new audiences, new perceptions, and the changing experiences of the teller demand ever new articulations of the story, reinterpretations of the past, reimagined futures.<sup>9</sup> Iteration is key to meaning, and no one knows this better than Bak. A master of retrospective refrains and revisions, he revisits the narrative wreckage of the Shoah, exploring its impact on Jewish life, Western history, human nature and culture. By returning, with the Shoah on his palette, to Vilna, his childhood, the Warsaw ghetto, the Bible, the great artistic masters, he paints stories that mourn, remember, and provisionally repair the once-beautiful, the once-vibrant. Standing in knowing doubt before idyllic visions and consoling fictions, he paints in ironic colors and exacting, troubling detail a universe of paradoxical truth that both bears witness to the wounded and lost and challenges all who see to take up the constructive work of repairing narrative wreckage wherever we find it.

What is *Creation of Wartime III*<sup>0</sup> if not a visual rendering of narrative wreckage? Michelangelo's ceiling has collapsed, and along with it the majestic universe it projects. His vision of an ideal Adam about to be imbued with the near-touch of divine life, about to enter history with promise, potential, and partner, explodes. Perfect physiques degrade into debilitated forms. Beauty disintegrates into brokenness. Solidarity with heaven's hosts gives way to abject solitude. Even the deity can't escape: The commanding presence of God literally evaporates in the Shoah's smoke. The wound's raw truth obliges another register, a new story, a revised prologue—*In the beginning was the Shoah...*

Bak clearly lives in doubt before Michelangelo's vision of creation and divine providence, a vision that many have equated with that of the Bible itself. Bak has even described himself as challenging the Bible's depictions of God and divine promises. But, as biblical exegetes, we wonder if Bak may not be quarrelling with the Bible as much as intuiting the Bible's own complicated efforts to sort through narrative wreckage and to repair communities fractured by cultural catastrophe. Perhaps the Bible, too, lives in doubt before all visions that fail to take into account the painful complexities of life. Perhaps the art of Samuel Bak and the art of biblical storytelling share deep resonances about the true

5. Robert Gibbs's translation of the relevant text in Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* in “Unjustifiable Suffering,” in *Suffering Religious*, ed. Robert Gibbs and Elliott R. Wolfson (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13-35.

6. See the interview of Bak in Richard Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint: A Case Study on the Life of a Photo* (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 2004), 154. This interview is reprinted in Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, *Icon of Loss: The Haunting Child of Samuel Bak* (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2009), 71-77.

7. See Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *JAAR* (1971): 291-311.

8. Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995), 55.

9. On Bak's iterative renderings of the Warsaw ghetto boy see Fewell and Phillips, *Icon of Loss*. See also Danna Nolan Fewell and Gary A. Phillips, “Bak's Impossible Memorials: Giving Face to the Children,” in *Representing the Irreparable: The Shoah, the Bible, and the Art of Samuel Bak*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, Gary A. Phillips, and Yvonne Sherwood (Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2008), 93-124.

10. In particular Bak's *Creation* (1999), *Creation of Wartime* (1999), and *Creation of Wartime II* (1999).

nature of suffering and survival. Perhaps Bak's relentless verisimilitude can lead us to see and hear more clearly how the Bible wrestles to structure and overcome suffering "while remaining true to the knowledge of the wound itself."<sup>11</sup> How might our readings of foundational stories—of covenant, creation, and crucifixion—reflect truly the Bible's labored efforts at *tikkun olam*?

### *Remembering Sinai*

In Bak's *Memorial* the fractured, pieced-together tablets of the Ten Commandments form both a visual metaphor for the broken Sinai covenant and a headstone memorializing the six million Jewish victims of the Shoah. The monument appears to mark where the dead are buried, but the bodies are not to be found, nor is the god who once delivered the people from Egypt's bondage. The tablets stand in, mark a place, for an absent deity and a missing people. Rusting double *yods*, letters signifying the divine name, are manually riveted to the top of one of the tablets, a seemingly desperate, wishful, imposition of divine presence. The people themselves are present only in traces and pieces: A dismembered, roughly remembered, Star of David becomes the center piece of the tablets' puzzle, its form a sorry example of the stone cutter's and iron worker's crafts. Here the identity of a people is patched back together after historical rupture, a rupture now integral to the identities of both those lost and those remaining, an insistent but uneasy cohesion in an unstable, damaged structure. The number 6 both grieves and accuses. Engraved in the digit are the six million who perished in the Shoah, as well as the sixth commandment, "Thou shall not kill." Implicated in this cipher, as well as in the barbed wire, prison-striped salvage, metal stays, and bullet holes, are both the victims and the perpetrators inextricably bound together.

When we return to the Exodus covenant narrative (Exodus 19-20; 31:18-34:35) with Bak's image in mind, we wonder what the biblical text is memorializing. What graves are being marked? What reminders are being issued? We note that laws, rules, and commandments are not needed where problems do not exist. A reminder *not* to kill is unnecessary if no killing is taking place. Covenants, contracts are not needed when parties trust one another to act responsibly. Consequently, we might ask, do the commandments attempt to



Samuel Bak, *Memorial*, 1986. Oil on canvas, 39.25 x 31.75 inches. Collection #BK54.

11. Raskin, *A Child at Gunpoint*, 154 (see Fewell and Phillips, *Icon of Loss*, 71-77).

bring cohesion to a world where little or none is to be found? Do they function to forge an ethos among ancient Israelites where there is a disparity and clash of values? And do they insist, maybe even overly so and to a fault, on divine presence, authorship, and authority because the community's experiences have given it reason to doubt and distrust?

The biblical stories hint at communal trauma. Moses himself, angry with the people's anxious need to image the god who delivered them from bondage, shatters the original tablets. A divinely ordained massacre of the people ensues, and a second set of tablets must be constructed, chiseled this time by human hand rather than the finger of God. The tablets become the symbol of the covenant—a truce perhaps—between people and God. But they also convey memories of violence, suffering, and betrayal, bearing the freight of doubly failed responsibility and trust. The insecure people who need signs of God's presence have offended the insecure, unsteady deity who reacts in defense of his honor.

Many scholars now posit that the Decalogue and its framing story of the encounter at Sinai, indeed the entire stretch of text from Genesis to Kings, comprise a post-exilic construction, an imaginative, theological remembering of the historical experiences of a community suffering first Assyrian, then Babylonian defeat and forced migration, enduring the hardships of reconstruction, and undergoing the continuing economic and political pressures of Persian occupation. If this is true, then we must ask how the destruction of the northern kingdom Israel (732-722 B.C.E.), of Jerusalem and its temple (586 B.C.E.), the killing and exiling of major portions of the population, the devastation of land and economy have informed the production of the text and its vision of covenantal partnership. Does the insistence on covenant reflect a communal situation where no covenant seems apparent, maybe even possible, where the people's confidence in God's continuing care and conscience is shattered? Do the Ten Commandments themselves, with their apodictic formulations, their notable neglect to articulate penalties for transgression, reflect an Imperial, subjected colony that lacks the authority even to discipline its own citizens? Amidst such cultural and political wreckage, do we discern a narrative attempt to shape a communal identity, in resistance, against the pressures of an alien Empire's values?

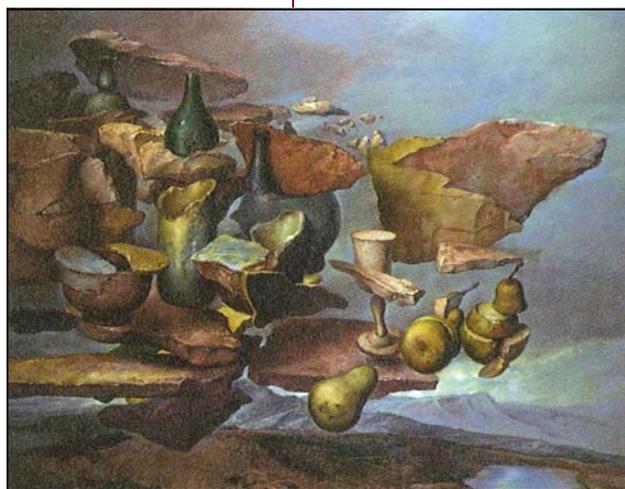
Granted, the Assyrian defeat, the Babylonian exile, and the subsequent centuries of hardship hardly match the magnitude or manner of the Shoah, and we recognize the critical and moral danger in equating all such cataclysms. Nevertheless, we detect in these events profound ruptures in Israel's history that compelled its official storytellers to rethink, to reimagine, the contours of the community's narrative self-representation. The covenantal story, from Abraham to David, is now reconstructed as an epic that artfully, truthfully discloses the suffering and loss that has been endured and maps more viable, less naive sequels. Mimicking political covenants imposed by domination, these wounded

storytellers project a life in covenant with God, perhaps as a subversive act of political resistance against Imperial rule, certainly as a means of defining the community over against the dominator. In any case, the story navigates narrative wreckage, structuring life and identity under colonization, expressing hope in God's ability and willingness to liberate—in effect, offering God another chance. At the same time, it holds God accountable to the same moral standards as the people: “Thou shall not kill” serves as much a reminder to God as it does a rule for the human community. We encounter here a narrative that artfully weaves together memories of cultural catastrophe, admissions of communal culpability, defiant resistance to captors, and a chastened view of a god whose promises and deeds have come up short.

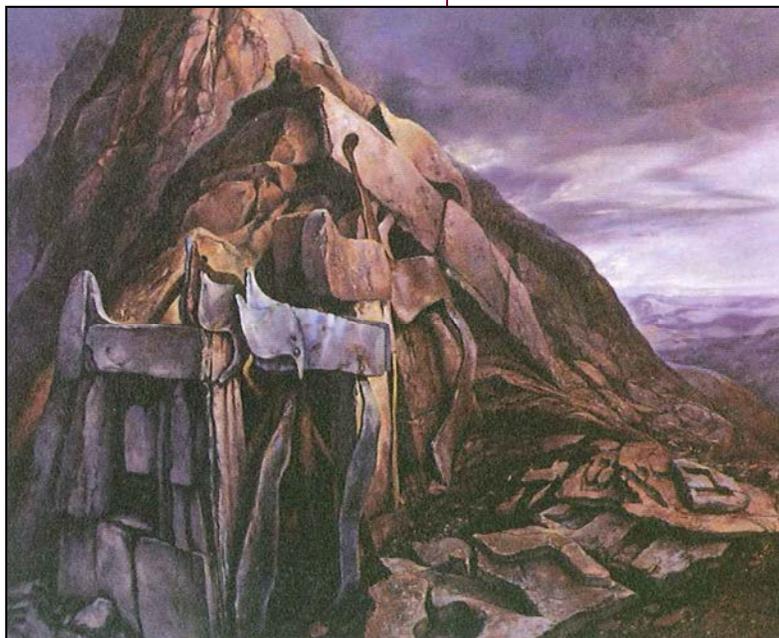
### *Reviewing Creation*

As we've seen above in *Creation of Wartime III*, Bak's images of creation raise similar questions and interpretive possibilities for reading *Genesis*. In his 1988 painting *Genesis*, creation begins with floating stones and cultural artifacts—broken bottles, random dishware, a chalice waiting to be filled, sliced fruit waiting to be eaten. Creation begins, not ex nihilo, nor even with some chaotic cosmic stew, but with life interrupted. *In the beginning was the interruption. . . .* Absent from the scene is the spirit of God hovering, birdlike, over the deep. Instead, remnants of damaged human community hang suspended over a barren landscape. Creation begins with a cataclysmic upheaval of normal life. In two paintings bearing the same title, *Bereshit Bara*, ruin and rubble literally constitute the very text of *Genesis* itself; architectural fragments form the Hebrew letters and words *bereshit bara* that launch the *Genesis* creation. Are words materializing from wreckage? Turning into wreckage? Are communal structures being built from words? Dissipating into words? Is creation coming undone? Or is it straining to emerge from un-creation?

Bak's imagery invites us to reread the initial chapter of *Genesis* with an eye toward the crises that most likely evoked it. As we well know, *Genesis* 1 is read ardently in classical theology as a statement about the world's naissance and nature, a determining source for doctrine about the nature of creation and the human condition. In historical critical investigation the text, with its emphasis on cosmos emerging from chaos, is



Samuel Bak, *Genesis*, 1988. Oil on linen, 31.25 x 39.5 inches. Collection #BK21.



Samuel Bak, *Bereshit Bara*, 1995. Oil on linen, 32 x 39.5 inches. Collection #BK351.

regarded as a superior monotheistic response to competing ancient Near Eastern creation accounts. At Bak's prompting, however, we see Genesis 1 in a different light,<sup>12</sup> as a story that structures the suffering of deportation, death en route and in diaspora. Like the Exodus account, it is the product of wounded storytellers responding to communal crises.

*Bereshit bara elohim*, “in the beginning of God's creating,” the land/earth was *tohu vbohu*, “without form and void,” or better, “wild and waste.”<sup>13</sup> *In the beginning*, there is a “rent at the heart of the world.”<sup>14</sup> exile, conquest, destruction, killing, captives, corvées. The prophet Jeremiah had borne witness to the event of Babylonian conquest and deportation. Using the anomalous phrase *tohu vbohu*, he describes a wild and wasted land, heavens without light, mountains quaking, a world without human inhabitant, desolation.<sup>15</sup> In the beginning, both the character of God and the storyteller of Genesis are confronted with *tohu vbohu*, the aftermath of destruction, narrative wreckage so profound that even the divine spirit finds itself in exile. Rather than seeing this God as the transcendent deity who exists outside of time and space,<sup>16</sup> we are invited instead to imagine a vulnerable god *in need* of time and space. In the beginning, a nameless, home-less, *elohim* hovers (Genesis 1:2) over the face of the deep, with nowhere to go and no people to claim as his own. Like the dove sent forth from the ark after the deluge, God has no place to set his foot, no way to end the ceaseless hovering.<sup>17</sup>

Surveying the material and narrative wreckage, working from his own need, his own lack, this God takes up the remains and begins to reorder time and space, to begin a new story, effecting a “repair of the world” through gatherings and separations, connections and divisions. God extends sentience and order beyond the divine self into once-empty, wasted *tohu vbohu*,<sup>18</sup> and he instructs those created in his image to do the same.

Human beings created in the image of a deity who experiences loss and acts to structure that loss, are not transcendent sovereigns in miniature. Rather, humans are positioned in the story, like the God who creates them, to move toward life and to reorganize their own world, to be fruitful and multiply, to fill and subdue, to rule and have dominion. Far from offering universal permission to dominate, these last commissions address a powerless, defeated people. They constitute not a license to some privileged sovereignty, but encouragement to the community to reclaim any space whatsoever, to carve out for itself a place, a home in a world gone awry, to replenish a dwindled population, to extend sentience, life, into empty, lifeless, space—as God himself has done. God and people are created in each other's image: Both confront and must respond to the need to give structure and purpose to life in response to suffering.

God's proposal, “Let us make,” reflects what the text is actually doing. The text is making, creating, realizing an identity, a new image, for this human

12. See Lawrence Langer, *In a Different Light: The Book of Genesis in the Art of Samuel Bak* (Seattle: University of Washington Press; Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2001).

13. Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 2000), 13.

14. Martin Buber's description of Job, quoted in *On the Bible*, ed., Nahum Glazer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 191.

15. See Jeremiah 4:23-26a, one of only two other places in which *tohu* and *bohu* occur together.

16. So argues Nahum Sarna in *Bereshit Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 5.

17. Compare with Deuteronomy 32:11, in which God is an eagle hovering over her nest in a desert wasteland.

18. Compare with the second part of Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

community. To be fruitful and multiply is an act of hope, of reimagination, of reinvention of a future where none had appeared to exist. The subsequent *toldoth*, or genealogies, bear witness to this future. A tool of survival and an act of pedagogy, the creation story structures suffering both for present survivors and for future generations who will need to learn how to confront narrative wreckage in their own lifetimes.

This brings us to the institution of Sabbath in Genesis 2:2-3 with its multiple functions within and beyond the story world. Sabbath resolves the divine dilemma, providing rest for the restless deity. The hovering, homeless god now has a place in time to alight, to cease from constant busyness. Sabbath will find fuller expression in subsequent Priestly material where the structuring of religious life parallels the creation of the world, and where cultic order is designed to create and protect a place for the *mishkan*, the place of God's presence. Hence, it will become increasingly clear that, for these wounded storytellers, God's presence among them is contingent upon the story they tell and the world they create and sustain. Sabbath provides a time and space to remember and retell that story, as a way of securing God's presence among them, as a means of unifying the community, and as an act of political re-sistance to an Empire demanding ultimate allegiance and ravenously siphoning the products of colonized labor. On the Sabbath the community is free to imagine life without class constraints and to consider for themselves what aspects of the world need mending.

The creation story in Genesis 1 is followed by others also wrestling with communal trauma. For, what is the story of the Garden of Eden but another attempt to structure the suffering of exile? It exposes other complicated truths of suffering—human culpability, divine ambiguity, and the mysterious role of desire divinely instilled in all living things. Genesis 4 tells another version involving two brothers, divine arbitrariness, human and divine failures to act responsibly, and yet another exile. The story of Noah follows, veiling exile with flood waters, speaking the difficult truth of both human and divine violence. The Babel tower, Abraham's call, Hagar's dismissal, Jacob's flight, Joseph's capture, and so it goes, retellings of exile, each limited and partial, iterative and recursive, but all attempting to work through communal trauma, to speak the truth of human and divine suffering, to accept and name human and divine culpability, and all re-imagining what the future holds.

### *Crucifixion and Crisis*

Finally, we turn to Bak's engagement with the Second Testament, the Christ figure, Christian theology, and the questions that engagement raises. If Bak subverts Michelangelo's universal Adam with his many mundane, particular, and beleaguered Adams, he also undermines the universal Christ of the Western Christian and artistic tradition with the faces and figures of particular children.

The crucifixion, the privileged image of human suffering in Western art history and the triumphant symbol of divine love and salvation in Christian theology, is repeatedly destabilized, most provocatively in Bak's paintings of the Warsaw ghetto boy. Playing upon the cruciform already implicit in the photographed boy's posture, Bak reproduces the boy as a new and different Christ figure who stands outside the convent door, waiting to enter Christian sanctuary and consciousness, challenging religious fixation with the crucifixion of Jesus and its vaunted power to effect salvation. For what salvation can Jesus provide for the lost children of the Shoah? Or to frame it in Emil Fackenheim's pointed question: "What are the sufferings of the Cross compared to those of a mother whose child is slaughtered to the sound of laughter or to the strains of a Viennese waltz?"<sup>19</sup> Even the young Sam Bak, though fascinated with and moved by images of the suffering Christ, finally concludes that traditional Christology has little to offer a child of the Shoah:

In some ways I felt luckier than Jesus. My dead father, a miserable prisoner of a Nazi camp, never pretended to be all-powerful. He was no master capable of creating worlds! Yet he saved me in the direst of circumstances from certain death, whereas Jesus' father, willing to see his son suffer, ignored the plea "Why have you forsaken me?" and let him die on the cross.<sup>20</sup>

The unresponsive deity that, in Christian tradition, allows, even enables, the death of the son as the instrument of world salvation becomes, in Bak's works, the unresponsive deity who permits the deaths of a million and a half children for no reason whatsoever. The ghetto boy, with his uplifted surrendering and pleading hands, implicates an indifferent deity, denying claim to any familial connection or grand universal plan, and recasts the salvific suffering of Jesus as the abandonment, torture, and execution of the innocent.

Indeed, in *Crossed Out II* we find Bak's child caught in the cross-hairs, bearing a cross, awaiting execution, his deathhood doubling as burial shroud. As we face the child, we realize that God is not the only party in question. Where are we in this picture? Do we hold the weapon that will ultimately cross this child out? Are we dispassionate observers, reluctant bystanders, unwilling to interrupt the violence? What are we willing to do?



Samuel Bak, *Study I*, 1995. Oil on linen, 18 x 21.75 inches. Collection #BK418.

19. Emil Fackenheim, *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections* (New York: New York University Press, 1970), 75.

20. Samuel S. Bak, *Painted in Words—A Memoir* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Boston: Pucker Art Publications, 2001), 375.



Samuel Bak, *Crossed Out II*, 2008. Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches. Collection #BK1171.

Such challenges to an unresponsive god and an implicated community can also be found, if one reads attentively, in the Gospel narratives themselves, in particular Mark's Gospel, whose abrupt ending pictures Jesus' disciples in stunned disappointment and disarray. Unlike Pharisee-competing Matthew, Rome-conscious Luke, and loquacious John, minimalist Mark provides no triumphant conclusion to Jesus' horrific suffering. There is no appearance of a resurrected Jesus, no once-again living Jesus to comfort the disciples, no characters capable of attributing meaning to Jesus' senseless suffering. All that remains by narrative end is an empty tomb with no body to be found and nobody to assure that all is or will be well. Rather, less an ending than a abrupt stop, the story pictures three women who flee from the scene desperately afraid and at risk: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). Most

scholars take this to be Mark's final word on the matter, although subsequent hearers were less than satisfied and proceeded to append no fewer than four alternative endings. The concluding "for they were afraid," is a grammatically ill-formed phrase, dangling ultimately its unsettled and unsettling preposition (*gar*), leaving the hearer hanging, mirroring perhaps the desperate women hanging on for dear life. But neither word nor resolution is forthcoming; the text remains suspended grammatically, narratively, and theologically.

If, as some scholars posit, Mark's gospel was produced during the time of and in response to the Roman siege of Jerusalem between 68 and 70 C.E., the story may reflect and reflect upon a cataclysmic moment that forever altered a community and its way of life.<sup>21</sup> After Vespasian has aborted his siege of the city to return to Rome to be acclaimed Emperor, a period of sixteen months elapses before his son Titus returns to complete the destructive task. Plausibly composed during this hiatus when the community experiences a tantalizing false reprieve, concluding perhaps that they have weathered the worst, the Markan text yanks them back to reality, painting a grave picture of both present and future. Gathering pieces of Hebrew prophecy and oral traditions of the early Christian community, the Markan storyteller assembles for the first time a narrative of Messiah Jesus and his disciples heading inexorably to death. With a present marked by quandary and fear, Mark forecasts an imminent future of utter abandonment: false prophets, arrest and trial, betrayal of brother by brother, father by child, and children by parents (Mark 13:5-37). Projecting present experience in Jesus' story, Mark prepares the community for a time when neither human nor divine help will be forthcoming; when all means of perseverance, salvation, recovery are in doubt; when religious tradition fails to make sense of the suffering and death that will be their lot. Caught in the liminal moment between life and death—*deathlife*—the Markan community is imaged in character and deed at a point of utter loss and abandonment by a deity seemingly untouched by suffering. No subsequent retelling of this ending and experience by Mark's editors or later gospel writers indebted to Mark's story, no matter how passionate the effort to accentuate life and downplay death, can erase or overwrite the searing memory Mark preserves. The Markan community lives but a generation and a half after Jesus' execution, an event that stunned his earliest followers and whose potent aftereffects have yet to dissipate. Mark remembers the death and the dead, and narrates a proleptic tale in which his community must now come to terms with their own near demise. If the storytellers of Genesis and Exodus are repairing their communal worlds in the aftermath of catastrophe, Mark writes in the midst of unfolding catastrophe aware that yet more narrative wreckage is imminent, suffering a certainty.

Like Bak's disturbing images of crucified children, Mark's narrative stands in grim doubt before certain grand Messianic expectations, portraying instead haunting scenes of the deaths of innocents and innocence. Just as Bak focuses our gaze on the death of this one child and the deaths of 6 million others, so

21. See Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2008).

Mark refuses to allow his audience to avert their eyes from the truth, confronting them repeatedly with the gruesome suffering that awaits Jesus in Jerusalem, and reshaping Jesus' experience as an unmistakable forecast of what lies ahead for them. Just as we are implored to bear witness to Bak's crucified boys and to consider our own culpabilities and responsibilities in a world hell-bent on destroying children, Mark's audience is also pressed with what is for them the ultimate question: What will they do? What will they do in the moment when suffering affords no escape, when choiceless choices are all that remain? Will they, like the Markan Jesus, attend to the physical needs of those around them? Will they afford compassion even while under duress themselves? Will they collaborate with the enemy? Will they die as they have lived? Will they run away in fear? Like Bak, Mark provides no answer. The ending leaves the final act of world repair to the reader knowing that so much remains in doubt: how does one respond to an incomplete sentence, to an empty tomb, to a community paralyzed by fear and sentenced to certain Roman destruction?

Responding to one commentator's observation that the gospel of Mark "is too harshly focused on the paradox of negation to be of enduring attraction," the late William Placher writes "Yet perhaps it is just these features of Mark that make a particular appeal in our age of uncertainty, when a Gospel that ends with Christ triumphantly present is harder to reconcile with the horrors of the world around us and the doubts within us. Mark throws the ball to us, as he did to his first readers. The three women run away silent, but we have heard the story; it is up to us, in our lives and testimony, to tell it and keep it alive."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, one might argue that the Bible habitually "throws the ball to us," leaving the final acts of world repair to its readers and its listeners. How does one respond to *tohu vbohu*, betrayed covenants, captive and besieged communities, forgotten promises, abandoned homes, forsaken cities, murdered children, lost dreams? And how are we, as readers, listeners, viewers, citizens of a different Empire positioned in relation to such wreckage? Can we identify with the wounded? Can we be counted among those who wound? The narrative art of the Bible, like the visual art of Samuel Bak, bears witness to the dead, to lives lived in affliction and uncertainty, lives that depended upon the text's construction, lives that continue to depend upon the text's interpretation. But the Bible is not a theological monument, a landmark offering certainty, or a cathedral ceiling attempting to circumscribe our worldview. Rather, like the works of Samuel Bak, the Bible marks a threshold. It shows us a road into a landscape of uncanny, scarred beauty where past and present, pain and possibility confront us and challenge us to recognize rupture and wreckage all around us, to see it clearly, to speak of it truthfully, to acknowledge our own culpabilities in its making, and to engage in the creative, painful labor, the artwork, of repairing the world.

22. William C. Placher, *Mark*, Theological Commentary series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming), 235.