

OLD TESTAMENTS AND NEW: JOYCE AND MESSIANIC TIME¹

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When asked why he chose Odysseus rather than Christ as a model for Bloom, Joyce was curt. Living with a woman was one of the most difficult things a man could do, and Jesus was a bachelor (Budgen 191). Still, Joyce was haunted by the mystery he flouted. According to Francini Bruni, his friend in Trieste, Joyce “only completely admires the unchangeable: the mystery of Christ and the mute drama that surrounds it. I can well imagine that his head was full of this mystery when he wrote *Ulysses* and that therein lies the allegorical point of this story of new martyrdom” (Potts 35). Bruni noted how Joyce frequented the Catholic churches of Trieste all through Holy Week, “so as not to miss a single syllable” (Potts 35). “As a child he was very religious,” recalled his sister Eileen: “I think that all of Jim’s loves were really created in the love of God” (Rodgers 29). His brother Stanislaus, a lifelong atheist, remarked sardonically of James’s temperament: “he who has loved God intensely in youth will never love anything less” (Stanislaus Joyce 159).

Joyce was a writer who snooped around old texts in hopes of finding a back door through which to effect an entry, and the New Testament was a major element in the creation of *Ulysses*. What fascinated Joyce was the audacity with which the gospel authors had cannibalised and rewritten the Old Testament, much as he himself would reconfigure earlier classics. *Ulysses* is itself both a fulfilment of earlier texts and an open, prophetic book.

Joyce revered the English mystic William Blake as another bard “who present, past and future sees” (Blake 21). As Blake wrote a prophetic book on the understanding that all tenses blend in the no-time of God, so did Joyce. Even in the Old Testament “a saviour is born,” as God-time is an eternal now and Jesus always existed (it was not God-the-Father who appeared on Sinai, but Jesus, the pre-existing Word). The lives of the prophets were shot through with a utopian potential not completely realised until incarnated in the figure of the New Testament Jesus, just as *The Odyssey* achieved its destined form in *Ulysses*. Only when Jesus delivered certain lines or performed specific actions did people realise that he was one of the prophets foretold. Only then did the sentences foretelling him become famous as prophecy, more significant than the rest of the testament. Joyce, likewise, selects key lines from the classics,

1 A similar version has since been published in *Ulysses and Us*.

even as he submits those texts to “a retrospective arrangement” (*U* 113). The New Testament, in effect, establishes the utopian, forward thrust of the older texts, and Joyce performs a similar service for it, and for them. In one sense, he liquidates all prior works; in another, he shows how much of them can be saved.

T.S. Eliot said that *Ulysses* manipulates a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity and that this method (which he dubbed “the mythical method”) had “the importance of a scientific discovery” (681). Yet such a technique is at least as old as the New Testament. A number of crucial passages culled from the Old Testament helped the first Christians to give shape to the life of Jesus. The Exodus narrative shows that God kept his promises to the people of Israel and gave them hope of better things, despite their occasional mutinies. The mutiny in the wilderness, the falling of manna from heaven, the handing over of the Tables of the Law on Mount Sinai; each has echoes in, respectively, the temptation in the desert, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, and the Sermon on the Mount. The twelve tribes of Israel find their equivalents in the twelve apostles. The edict of Pharaoh that all male babies, including Moses, should die prefigures Herod’s killing of first-born males in the attempt to do away with Jesus.

So the Christian life was ‘fitted’ to the Exodus paradigm, with the forty days spent by Jesus in the desert as a reconstruction of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness by the people of Israel. Jesus, the “agenbayer” mentioned in *Ulysses* (253), embarked on this period of penitential wandering and waiting to buy back a people, but also to redeem the old texts. As such, Jesus’ wanderings recapitulate those of Odysseus, but also anticipate the experience of the Irish diaspora awaiting Home Rule. In their confused passage through the wilderness, those who were once Pharaoh’s slaves were transformed into God’s free people, and that period of forty years was felt to be necessary to allow for the creation of a generation unaccustomed to bondage.

The mutiny in the desert enrages God but Moses mollifies him, coming down the mountain carrying what in *Ulysses* will be called “the tables of the law [...] in the language of the outlaw” (181). That new dispensation on Sinai is not an action subject to any human control. It represents, rather, an irruption of a divine force into the everyday human world, which has been triggered by some sort of involuntary memory (see Alter 75, 104). This gives to the rediscovered past the excitement of surprise, the force of a revelation after a period of denial, brought about through associative mechanisms. It teaches people how to make a past moment contemporary, how to make the ancients live again in

'our' time. The event reverberates back into the past but also forward into an uncertain future.

After Sinai, the people wanted laws, but not too many, as such a truth is less narratable in words than something to be felt from within. The radical innovation of the New Testament is its uncovering of an interiority even more subtle and deep than that known to Homer. Edward Said observed, in one of his final essays, that in *The Odyssey* characters awaken every morning as if to the first day of their lives: and so for them the day becomes the unit to be seized (100-101).² In the Christian Bible, however, the lives of characters come heavy with an implication, extending back and forward in space and time.

There a past event is only fully interpreted, and in that sense *completed*, by a present one, which may claim the status of the real, making the past seem mythical by comparison. If the epic bard is the person "who present, past and future sees," then the Blake who noted that now-time is someone who recognises that this further develops Homer's insight that the gods are human creations – hence Blake's phrase celebrating the "human form divine" (29). Certain protagonists, in moments of greatness, can seem both human and godlike, caught up at the mercy of their historical moment, yet somehow enabled to transcend it. For instance, Jesus can weep real tears at the sight of the dead Lazarus, all the time knowing that he has the power to raise him. Similarly, certain literary texts reverberate with predecessors and successors to such a degree that they transcend their time and partake, it seems, in the very creativity of the gods.

The covenant agreed on Sinai is less a legal formulation than a description of a developing relationship. The Egypt fled by the people of Israel, which in *Ulysses* is repeatedly compared to the British Empire, is seen as a rigid bureaucracy fixated on control and order, whereas for the chosen people there is "only the assumption of a life-relationship that is not fixed, and requires Israel to live in freedom before the ever-new tasks of daily life" (Fishbane 96; see also Walzer 53-55). In such a radical order, the new leader could never be charismatic. Hence Bloom's quiet, undemonstrative decency, and the fact that the new order must be developed tentatively during a period of wandering. Galilee thus becomes a symbol of "the periphery becoming the new" (Freyne 271-272), as the pilgrim arrives in a city such as Jerusalem or Dublin and learns how to challenge its codes.

If the manifest content of *The Odyssey* is the scaffolding that eventually falls away to reveal the latent content of *Ulysses*, such a technique is not neces-

2 Said acknowledges the priority of Erich Auerbach in this analysis.

sarily taken from Marx or Freud. The same technique can be found where they most likely discovered it too: in the Torah as the root principle of Jewish tradition. "People without understanding see only the narrations, the garment," it was taught; "those somewhat penetrating see also the body; but the truly wise [...] pierce all the way through to the soul" (Fishbane 34). The outer garments of earlier classics are removed from *Ulysses*, like so many teasing veils, to disclose what lies beneath. The reader of a holy book in Jewish tradition must concede to the proposal that there is a divine wisdom in the text before seeking to disrobe the bride in order to unite with her behind her many veils. The Jews, in fact, saw the cycle of literary history as a progressive move toward the revelation of such an unmapped interior (Fishbane 34-40). Homer was poetic but his work was secular. Virgil's writings anticipated the gospels in some elements, but only indirectly. Sacred scripture could, however, contain all the wise lore of predecessor works, retrospectively giving them 'salus.' Everything was in the holy book, including all that had been known to predecessors. It was to this precise model that Joyce worked in *Ulysses*, "*ut implerentur scripturae*" (561), 'that the scriptures might be fulfilled.' The image of Rudy, Bloom's dead son, studying his Hebrew text "from right to left" (702) at the end of "Circe," is based on the notion that revealed teachings are a dead letter unless revitalised in the mouth of those who study them. Joyce understood that for the Jews the act of interpretation itself partakes of, and adds to, the holiness of scripture. A criticism of the text in which God speaks in itself might also be the voice of God. Hence the strongly autocritical element, present in passages throughout *Ulysses*, which supplies the very apparatus by which the book might be interpreted.

Jesus fulfilled the Torah not by abolishing it but by bringing its lore up to date. Joyce's characteristic idea of a text as a work-in-progress is central to the Jewish tradition. The fragments assembled drew strength not so much from a past totality, as from the notion of a perfected work yet to be done. Hence the emphasis on *waiting*. An old Jewish joke concerns an unemployed labourer who is appointed, after many delays, to be the paid watchman on the lookout for the Messiah. He soon grows disgruntled with the long hours and bad conditions. "I can hardly feed my family on what you pay me," he complains, only to be told: "You should take comfort in the supreme importance of the work you do. Besides, unlike almost all others, yours is a permanent job."

The first followers of Jesus used texts of the Old Testament to help make sense of the new one. This textual analysis was not undertaken for the purposes of conversion – after all, as Leopold Bloom rightly recalls, Jesus himself was a Jew. Bloom is as cautious, as was Jesus, in his claims to any form of

divinity. When he sees a handbill about a prophet, he humbly wonders “Bloo..me?” (291), and when interrogated in “Circe” he tactfully counters, “you have said it” – echoing the “Thou sayest it” of Jesus. The humiliating death of a pretender mocked with a crown of thorns threw the claims of his followers into doubt: and so a vast effort was expended to show the basis in ancient literature for the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus. Bloom seems utterly ludicrous when named the new messiah – a title first sarcastically conferred by the Citizen in “Cyclops,” before his mock-investiture in “Circe.” Yet Jesus himself was called messiah when he least looked like the foretold king of the Jews.

The martyrdom of Jesus was absolutely necessary, as he had to become a martyr to textuality as much as to the Roman officials who condemned him. As Luke wrote, “it is written that Christ should suffer and be raised from the dead on the third day.”³ His followers recycled fragments of the Old Testament before a new, coherent narrative was generated. So the close interpretation of texts became for early Christians what it had long been for the Jews, a method of religious meditation. Each past fragment of text was only considered to be ‘completed’ or incarnate when understood for the first time within the new framework. Then it was free to disappear into the new narrative, much as Homer, The Bible, Dante, and Shakespeare are intended by Joyce to vaporise into *Ulysses*. Just as *Ulysses* contains many fragments from earlier texts so the New Testament has many interpretations of the Old interpolated into its episodes.

The New Testament shows how the prophetic method works as a form of autocriticism. For example, Jesus foretells that Peter will deny him three times, and even as he is being taunted by his torturers to “Prophecy,” one of his most dramatic predictions is being fulfilled “as it has been written.” The Book of Psalms is often seen as giving shape and inner momentum to the story of Jesus, as it moves through many moods from complaint to vindication; the same trajectory by which Bloom outfaces his detractors. Bloom exits Little Britain Street in a chariot, restrained in his seat by Jack Power, in a scene which is oddly true to the words of the New Testament, attributed by Mark the Evangelist to Jesus at his own trial: “You will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62).

Apart from the blatant equation of Bloom and Jesus in the earlier scene (“I’ll crucify him,” 445), there are many more subtle echoes buried beneath the textual surface of *Ulysses*. In “Aeolus” the newsboys mimic Bloom’s walk,

3 For an analysis, see Juel (14).

echoing Psalm 89:51: "with which thy enemies taunt, O Lord, with which they mock the footsteps of thy anointed." The chariot of brightness which bears Bloom to heaven comes out of Isaiah 48:9-10: "You who were taken up by a whirlwind of fire, in a chariot with horses of fire," to turn the head of the father to the son and restore the tribe of Jacob.

So many lines of the New Testament re-echo the Psalms that scholars conclude, as Mark had done, that the speaker of the Psalms must have been Jesus. Whether this could be true or not, all the Evangelists asserted that instances in the life of Jesus persistently recapitulate moments in the Psalms, such as the cry on the cross ("My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?") or the casting of lots for the dead man's garments. The premonitory dream Stephen has of Bloom, holding out melons in the street of harlots ("Come in. You will see," 59) has its source in Matthew 26:64 and Mark 14:62 ("You will see"), and the Jesus who repeatedly calls himself not God but son of man is repeated in Stephen's prophecy of "the man" (59).

A literature that reveals a latent content in this fashion offers something more than a set of analogies, which any reader of external elements might notice. It also makes available a secret lore, but only to privileged insiders or special decoders. The phrases deliberately echoed from the older text take on an extra charge and depth: they are shot through with prophetic potential, only fulfilled much later in the words and actions of a special man. Those words and actions in turn reverberate, as if they can no longer be merely factual records of a witnessed event but may have power to shape future, as yet unwritten, texts.

There is an immense danger in such writing. If a generation has witnessed the fulfilment of prophecies, that recognition can lead to an appalling smugness and complacency, as if 'we' are history's cutting edge. This is the terrible risk taken by the Evangelists: of making Christianity seem a 'trump' over Judaism. Yet latent in the prophetic method was also a warning: if Jesus really surpassed Moses and Elijah, then some day the Christian gospels might themselves be superseded. If the Old Testament could be reconfigured by a reviser, so also in time might the New. Ever the cunning scholar, Joyce knew that some day his book would be cannibalised. He even began that process himself.

The urge to create is also a destructive urge. The story of Jesus led to the superannuation of that very history it 'completed' as prelude to redemption. After Jesus, the Old Testament would be a pre-history open to opportunistic recasting, just as after Joyce all prior forms of realism would be seen as two-

dimensional. There was nothing meek or mild about the technical claims for a new narrative art latent in the work of the Four Evangelists. Dozens of other gospels fell into oblivion, just as many modernist texts never achieved the fame of *Ulysses*. These texts were lost for similar reasons: they did not offer such radical innovations of form – or such wisdom.

Before the New Testament, lowly folk were portrayed in a largely condescending manner. Even Homer does not use his more poetic style on the nurse or the swineherd. The Evangelists were democrats by comparison, the teachings of Jesus warning that whoever exalted himself would be humbled and whoever humbled himself would be exalted.⁴ So the language used to describe the fishermen who followed Jesus is the same used for him. This is a truth recalled by George Russell in the Library episode of *Ulysses*: “the movements which work revolutions in the world are born out of the dreams and visions in a peasant’s hut in the hillside” (238). Christianity arose from the common people and its narrative art worked to similar effect. Ordinary lines spoken by common persons, such as a carpenter’s son, were suddenly filled with world-historical implication.

What was remarkable in subsequent centuries was how few artists seemed to register the underlying point: even Shakespeare tended to treat ordinary people as “rude mechanicals,” dropping from poetry to a prose register whenever they came centre stage. Which is simply to say that society itself was still not answering the challenge posed by Jesus. It was only in the later nineteenth century, with the move towards universal franchise, that a realist art, in the hands of authors such as Émile Zola and Thomas Hardy, began to register the deeper after-shocks of the Christian transformation, by which time many of the core elements of the Christian epic were already dying. One explanation of the fashion for modernisations of classic or Celtic stories at the start of the twentieth century may lie in the fact that artists wanted to see how these narratives would change if they were ‘democratised.’ Synge’s use of common speech and everyday psychology in his dramatisation of the Deirdre legend may indeed have given Joyce some pointers for *Ulysses*.

What is greatest in art is often achieved when a people is moving out of a period of primitivism, but has not yet fully submitted to the constraints of a new world. Their most intrepid souls retain some of the old energies even as they seek to contain them in newer forms. Often these new shapes, such as subterranean popular movements, appear on the periphery of great powers, which

4 The most brilliant analysis of the new realism in the New Testament gospels is found in Auerbach (72-73).

would help to explain why Dublin produced so many advanced modernists. However, these resurgences often come after a period of trauma, what Gaelic poets called *longbhriseadh* (“shipwreck”) or Jewish scribes ‘catastrophe,’ a terrible but challenging disaster that becomes the precondition of a change to a new future. In like manner, the new form evolved by the Evangelists implies the abolition of the Old Testament, except as a source for the New one.

The entire Jewish bible was to be ransacked and broken up in order to confirm the historical truth of the Jesus story, yet its ultimate authority was necessary to prove the authenticity of Jesus. The earlier texts were to be, in effect, illuminated at that very moment when they were about to be displaced. After all, without these crucial lines being given reverberative power by the life of Jesus, the earlier works might never have been felt to have major significance beyond their immediate place and time. In the act of being made flesh, they were also superannuated. If there seems something humble about Joyce’s arrogance, and something arrogant about his humility, that is because he also presents his text as the one which lights up all previous elements of the cycle, according them a new dignity and meaning, even as he renders them subordinate to his own project. Within *Ulysses* itself he performs a similar feat: the closing soliloquy of Molly Bloom, though strictly redundant to the plot-line, gives an unprecedented degree of meaning and coherence to what has gone before.

Even this example is mere pre-text, however, for the whole thrust of *Ulysses* suggests that just as we are the future of the past, with the right to remake the old for a new order, we are also the past of someone else’s future, ourselves bound to be remade. In the Library, Stephen ponders, “in the future, the sister of the past, I may see myself as I sit here now but by reflection from that which then I shall be” (249). The incursion of the future, as yet unknown, into a present narrative which shapes that future, even as its own self-accounting is shaped by it – that was Joyce’s reason for setting his book a decade and more earlier than the time of its actual writing. This distance allowed him to show how shreds of the future, as well as of the past, are lodged in the present moment.

As an advanced thinker, Joyce was not just ahead of his time. Like the prophets of old, he could see so deeply into the present that the shape of the future might become discernible. Nothing in the story of Jesus becomes fully interpretable until after the resurrection, and Joyce himself was seeking a vantage point in the future from which the present would begin to make sense.

Nietzsche once said that people needed to be able to 'forget' in order to make the 'new' possible, but that the present is always passing into a tradition that tries to maintain its claim on some future (Handelman 154-156). Modernity needs history, even as past texts need present ones. They depend on one another, even as they clash, and the modern text is always rapidly sacrificed to the tradition that absorbs it. This is the deeper meaning of that Eucharist around which not only the life of Jesus but also the meeting of Bloom and Stephen is organised. If bread symbolises union, made of many grains fused by water, its breaking is the breaking-open of the meaning of the words hidden in the texts (Wills 103). Such a 'feast day,' proofed against destruction by ritual acts of remembrance repeated from year to year, not only recalls the first event but also guarantees future acts of remembrance. This may be yet another reason why there are no quotation marks in *Ulysses*, for in a sense *everything* in the book is a quotation.

Bloom is mockingly introduced, a Jew in a gentile city, as new apostle to the gentiles. One of the most innovative injunctions of Jesus concerned this very point: the need not just to embrace traditional enemies of Israel, but also to include and love them in an expanded definition of community. That community was redefined as "whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Swartley 52-53, 93). Hence Bloom's discharge of maternal as well as fraternal roles. The logic was latent in the Exodus narrative: "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger; for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Walzer 140). The new covenant must be wholly free of racial or territorial constraint: and on that basis a narrowly nationalist Messiah would constitute a defeat for the politics of Exodus. Joyce's formula for Bloom as the central presence in *Ulysses*, "jewgreek is greekjew" (266), comes out of a letter of St Paul to the Galatians: "There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor freeman; there is no male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:26-9).

St Paul has been described as the first Bolshevik, a radical who wished in this way to universalise the Torah, yet this open-hearted approach led, in time, to that very anti-Semitism which victimises Bloom, for it denied a positive value to Jewish ethnic identity, presenting it instead as a disgrace. By this means, Jews became the Other of Christians (Swartley 252), the sign of a terrible chasm in Christianity. Yet Paul, perhaps not noting the limits he was setting to his own tolerance, presented the oneness in Christ Jesus as the triumphant fulfilment of all previous Jewish tradition. Joyce's Dublin Christians commit similar errors. One asks Bloom "What is your Christian name?" and another asks whether he thinks an acquaintance has a face "like our saviour" (149). Yet

Joyce values Bloom to the extent that he can recognise the 'stranger' within himself. He is more Christ-like than any of his fellow citizens, constantly willing to put himself in the other fellow's position. Joyce was following Paul of Tarsus in the attempt to imagine a world without foreigners, a world made possible once men and women accept the foreigner within the self and the necessarily fictive nature of all nationalisms.

The main emphasis in the New Testament is on the suffering humanity of Jesus. His identity as a foretold king is kept secret, as if its announcement might precipitate even greater persecution. The problem faced by writers of the New Testament was how to present God in a man – the person *and* his thoughts, a God-man (Hanson 281). Unlike Krishna, Jesus is deeply human, his willingness to answer for the sins of the world, despite his own goodness, an even greater sacrifice than his death. Yet by becoming man, Jesus after his death made a higher evolution in mankind possible, that all might find it possible to become "the human form divine." The identity of Jesus was an open space into which people could read what they wanted, and one which disrupted most of the official codes with which it came into contact. He even began to joke about this in moments of relaxation with the disciples. The question "who do men say that I am?" leads to various suggestions: John the Baptist, Elijah, but ultimately "the Christ." Bloom also is an open identity, who often seems at a given moment to be whatever anyone says he is. This, however, is an experience well known to Irish people, whose image in the world has been generated by forces more powerful than they.

Nino Frank said that Joyce's privacy was that of "someone entering a religious order" (Potts 76). It is an apt analogy. His book *could* be a divinely inspired text or a random gathering of words, for he worked on the borderline between religion and nihilism. He liked to joke that the Catholic Church, like the See of Peter, was founded on a pun. When Gertrude Stein joked that *Ulysses* was incomprehensible "but anybody can understand it" (Ellmann 529), she was sarcastically alluding to its growing reputation in Paris as a sort of sacred text. It is a book that may call for years of study by scholars, while being open to all, as were the previous books of civilisations. "You should approach Joyce," said William Faulkner, "as a preacher approaches the Old Testament – with faith" (Stein 77).

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