EXODUS TO THE PROMISED LAND AS EVINCED IN NINETEENTH- AND TWENTIETH- CENTURY AMERICAN FICTION[1]

***Abstract**: Exodus has been one of the favorite fictional topics undertaken by American fiction writers due to the fact that they belong to the so-called "Chosen People" that were not to trespass God's covenant. My paper identifies two major Exodus themes: the Israelites' Exodus from Egypt (the Biblical wilderness, and the Promised Land) and human/divine justice as considered in the Bible. Observing the typological concept, these themes are analyzed in connection with their American antitype themes: the Pilgrim Fathers' Exodus from Europe (the American continent as a counterpart to the Biblical Mosaic wilderness and America (New England) as the Promised Land) and the Puritans' judicial system.*

***Keywords**: typology, Exodus, American fiction.*

Even though I do not claim to have invented "the wheel," my contention in connection with American literature as a whole and with that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular, is that it has taken shape and developed as an original literature by enriching its fictional world with a great variety of Genesis Biblical themes mainly inspired to it by the very founders of the American nation, the Mayflower Pilgrim Fathers. Exodus from England and afterwards from the Netherlands toward the "New Canaan", with God as their only moral support has imprinted both on the citizens of the American nation and on the corresponding fictional world of their literature a strong Biblical spirit.

In this paper I am emphasizing the literary influence of the Bible on nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction. My aim is to demonstrate the value of the interdisciplinary study of literature and the Bible for those who do not have a religious orientation, as well as for those who do.

The paper refers to American novels which take subject matter and mainly themes from the Book of Exodus, as their starting point, attempting to make sense of them in nineteenth- and twentieth- century fiction, respectively. Secondly, in my endeavor I explore the ways in which fiction is generated, how one story prompts the telling of another, a process which can be traced back to the Bible itself, and encountered in the Jewish concept of Midrash.

What I am here calling "the Bible" is really only one of several Bibles. I have chosen, for literary reasons only, what is virtually the Protestant Bible, the Bible of the central Anglophone tradition. Thus, I have used the King James Version since it is the version most English and American readers/novelists associate with the literary qualities of the Bible.

In order to make clear the orientation of America's novelistic tradition towards the Bible, I find it useful to concentrate on the main Biblical themes from the Book of Exodus as treated by major American writers in general, and by two of the most important, in particular, namely Herman Melville and John Steinbeck.

American literature via Englishmen heading to New England, since the printing of the English Version of the Bible has found between its covers three influential elements: style, language, and fictional material. Hence, American literature

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has found more of its material in the Bible than in anything else. It has looked there for its characters, its illustrations, and its subject-matter.

Consequently, we again state that great American literature shows the influence of the Bible. McAfee, for instance, admits that "like everything else in America, it has been founded on a religious purpose. Writers in all lines have been trained in the Bible. If they feel any religious influence at all, it is the Bible influence." (http://www.bible-researcher.com/mcafee4.html)

The thesis that we propose and hereby state is that the Bible served as the fundamental literary influence as well as the chief source in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American fiction. The Biblical themes that appear in the Biblical book of Exodus have influenced from a literary perspective American literature, especially the works of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American novelists. Consequently, we can state that American fiction writers "translated" the Bible into American fiction, transforming it into the New World's fictional voice.

Typology

The typological concept stands for the juxtaposition of types (including people, institutions, or events), and is employed in exegesis when a Biblical scene or figure is taken up and viewed as an interpretative analogy for a contemporary belief or practice. Christopher Rowland points out that "the relationship between type and antitype is suggested by the accumulation of points of correspondence between two (or more) narratives or characters." (Rowland, 2009: 19)

The type and the antitype are not identical and cannot be one and the same person, institution, or event, since, by definition, typology involves a process of describing one thing in terms of another. The correspondences are consequently based on difference as well as similarity. Henceforth Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 can see an analogy between what had happened to the disobedient people of Israel in the wilderness and the Corinthian Christians with whom he has to deal. What Paul seems to suggest is that the earlier story is not primarily about what happened to the people of Israel in the past but is written specifically as a warning for the recipients of the letter, the Corinthians. The type functions, therefore, as a warning to readers not to pursue a path similar to that followed in the original story.

Northrop Frye reflects on the fact that critics should know about the Bible and Biblical typology, which are crucial to the comprehension of many literary texts (Frye, 1957: 14). The critic also sees typology as the centre of the studies of the Bible, literary symbolism and criticism. Just as Moses put a veil over his face after he had seen God, to prevent the children of Israel seeing the shining of his face (Exodus 34:33-5), so Saint Paul sees the Old Testament as containing secrets hitherto veiled from its readers (Prickett, 1990: 655): "until this day remaineth the same vail untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which vail is done away in Christ" (2 Corinthians 14).

Israel is the type, Jesus the antitype. Just as Moses organizes the twelve tribes of Israel, so too does Jesus bring together twelve disciples. By crossing the Red Sea, Israel achieves its identity as a nation; when Jesus is baptized in the Jordan, he is recognized as the Son of God. The crossing is also a type of the Resurrection (Frye, 1982: 172-3).

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The Biblical Book of Exodus

The title Exodus signifies "a going out." This book was written by Moses during the wilderness wanderings of the Hebrews in the fifteenth century BC. It contains his record of the bondage of Israel in, and their departure from, Egypt.

The deliverance of Israel from Egypt was the beginning of a purpose. "You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation," said Jehovah to His people (Exodus 19: 6). In the land of Canaan they were to be God's witnesses that all nations might learn to know Him during the centuries to come.

The wilderness of the Old Testament is often depicted as a desert or wasteland. Namely, in Exodus, the Lord led the Israelites through wild areas in order to test their faith. The difficulties and hardships of this journey provided the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers a useful precedent for explaining their problems in the New World. By considering themselves the children of Israel, the Puritans perceived the risks of their settlement as part of a divine plan to cleanse the colonists of their sinfulness before they could enter the Promised Land. The Puritans' need to overcome these temptations, moreover, constituted an important part of the moral battle against Satanic forces. Only by defeating the forces of evil concealed in the wilderness could the settlers of New England hope for salvation among the Chosen People (Arsene-Onu, 2010: 58)

Although a time of trial and temptation, the forty-year sojourn of the Israelites in the wilderness also signified an escape from the persecutions of Egypt. The concept of the wilderness as a sanctuary from worldly corruption persisted in Christian thought and influenced, in fundamental ways, the Puritans' understanding of their self-exile from Stuart England (Carroll, 1969: 61).

"Let My People Go" - Exodus in the African American Experience

Christian history has witnessed many exodus movements patterned and conceived after the Biblical exodus. As scholars have observed, the exodus event is a paradigm, not only the central event in Israel's ancient past but, according to Michael Walzer, "a big story, one that became part of the cultural consciousness of the West" (Walzer, 1985: 7). Time after time in myriad creative ways, Jews and Christians envisioned themselves as the Israelites of old, subjected to oppressive conditions but delivered by God's power and rewarded a Promised Land (figuratively or literally) for maintaining their faith. Indeed, as Donald Akenson points out, "Every European nation at one time or another has had leaders or prophets who say that their country is chosen of God and is, in effect, the successor of the children of Israel, and that its citizens are living in the Promised Land" (Akenson, 1992: 5).

Historically, exodus movements have been generally expressed in two ways. Some movements, such as those of the New England Puritans were actual physical migrations, viewed as a kind of exodus to the Promised Land. In such instances, God delivered a people out of the hands of their oppressors, protected them during their "wilderness" journey, and rewarded them with new land – sometimes for example, as Amerindians would find out, at the expense of others.

Not surprisingly, no other group has appropriated the exodus theme so often and in so many diverse ways as African American Christians. The Biblical exodus is their story, for just as the Israelites encountered Yahweh in bondage, so they first encountered Christianity amid their own enslavement. Throughout their history, blacks have equated Pharaoh and Egypt with white slaveholders, racists, and general oppression, and identified themselves first with the Hebrew slaves, then as those freed

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by their "Moses" from bondage and headed toward – though often failing to reach – the Promised Land. Just as Moses never entered Canaan but viewed it from afar on Mount Pisgah, so African Americans, despite freedom from slavery, have never entered the American Promised Land of full equality and economic well-being.

Exodus Imagery in *The Grapes of Wrath*

The Biblical story of the Exodus is found in the forty chapters of the book of Exodus and the thirty-six chapters of the book of Numbers. As J.R.C. Perkin mentions, "Steinbeck quotes Biblical texts, subtly or significantly changes phrases, employs direct or inverted images, and consciously or unconsciously narrates a parallel story" (Perkin, 1993: 80). So fundamental and so extensive is the Biblical imagery that it cannot be regarded as either accidental or incidental.

Among the suggestive parallels with the Biblical concepts and narratives found in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the title of the book itself. The title phrase has a Biblical meaning, but it is not found in the Bible as such. In its proper form it can be found in Julia Ward Howe's hymn, written in 1861: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,/ He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." In Revelation 14: 18-19 we encounter the image of the harvest implying the concept of *grapes* and *the wrath of God*:

> Thrust in thy sharp sickle, and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth; for her *grapes* are fully ripe. And the angel thrust in his sickle into the earth, and gathered the vine of the earth, and cast it into the great winepress of the *wrath of God*.

Consequently, in the Bible the harvest is almost always used as an image of judgment and the hymn pictures God initiating judgment by beginning the process of making wine from the grapes of God's wrath.

At the end of Chapter 25 Steinbeck makes it plain that he understands that the grapes of wrath are a symbol of both violence and judgment:

> The people come with nets to fish for potatoes in the river, and the guards hold them back; they come in rattling cars to get the dumped oranges, but the kerosene is sprayed. And they stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quick-lime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. (Steinbeck, 1969: 238)[1]

The names used by Steinbeck are of great interest. Are the initials of Jim Casy accidental or by design? He is a former preacher who goes on preaching in an unorthodox, earthy way, and it is his comments which convey much of Steinbeck's philosophy to us. The name Rose of Sharon invites comment. In the Old Testament "Rose of Sharon" is used of beauty in unlikely places, Sharon being a forbidding, rugged area. The actual phrase "Rose of Sharon" is found in the Song of Solomon 2:1 where it is paralleled with "the lily among thorns." Steinbeck uses this unlikely name in a direct Biblical sense – she represents grace and beauty among the rough and sordid. It has been suggested that Rose of Sharon is a Mary figure. Although her baby is born dead, it is she who, in the book's closing paragraph, offers milk to the starving man.

[1] In the text of the article the abbreviation *GW* will be mentioned parenthetically for the following edition of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath.* 2nd New Bantam edition, Bantam Books, New York, 1969.

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(Perkins, *op. cit.,* 84). This slender glimmer of hope is all that is left, and significantly the scene is set in a barn.

While the birth of Rose of Sharon's baby in a box-car invites suggestions of parallels with the birth of Jesus, there are other aspects of the story which exemplify the use of inverted Biblical imagery. Rose of Sharon's dead baby is put in a box and pushed into the swirling waters of the flooded river; in opposition, the baby Moses avoided the death ordered by Pharaoh for all Hebrew boys by being hidden in an ark of bulrushes among the tall plants at the river's edge.

Explicit references to or quotations of the Biblical text are few in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In the first meeting between Casy and young Tom Joad there is a dramatic anecdote about eating pork. Then come the words

> Casy suggested elaborately, "Maybe Tom'll kill the fatted calf like for the prodigal in Scripture." (*GW* 21)

When Grampa dies, Tom hunts for a suitable text from the Bible and eventually chooses "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1). Much later in the story, when Tom is in hiding because he has killed the one who killed Casy, he repeats words he had heard Casy quoting:

> Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him that is alone when he falleth; for he hath not another to help him up. (…) Again, if two lie together, then they have heat: but how can one be warm alone? And if one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) (*GW* 585)

In the book of Exodus, a man named Moses is called, through an experience at the burning bush, to return to Egypt to lead the enslaved children of Israel to freedom and ultimately to a new promised land. After several confrontations with Pharaoh and after ten plagues, Moses eventually leads the Israelites out of Egypt. The flight is hurried and marked by the ritual slaughter of lambs in the archetypal Passover feast. On the way to Canaan the migrants organize their community, the Ten Commandments are given to Moses at Sinai, there are wanderings, disappointments and battles, and eventually they arrive at Jordan, the border of the Promised Land. Moses is not allowed to enter that land; the leadership passes to Joshua, and the task of settlement is in his hands.

The American Continent as a Counterpart to the Biblical Mosaic Wilderness

While the colonists interpreted the American wilderness with traditional metaphors, in effect, the physical realities of the New World challenged the symbolic wilderness of the Bible. This interaction can be examined in the realm of Puritan social theory that held "two logically antithetical versions of the mission to New England," (Carroll, *op. cit.*, 3-4) mentioned by Peter N. Carroll. First, the founders of Massachusetts Bay intended to erect a city on a hill, a unified, organic society bound internally by Christian love. Such a city would enclose the entire population within the confines of strong walls. Secondly, in defending their migration to the New World, the colonists emphasized the importance of settling uncultivated areas. According to Genesis (1:28), they argued, the Lord had commanded the sons of Adam to subdue the earth and God undoubtedly had included the American continent in this commission.

Conditioned by Biblical metaphors and promotional literature (practice that can be found in John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which the Okies are

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lured by some promotional "orange-colored handbills" (*GW* 568) to leave their households and set off for California), the Puritans viewed the American wilderness from a variety of perspectives. For some, New England signified the New Canaan; others anticipated a barren wasteland; some regarded America as a land of spiritual darkness; and an important segment of the ministry acclaimed the New World a refuge. But regardless of these paradoxical assessments, a sense of self-assurance pervaded the entire mission.

Agreeing with John Winthrop that America was "the good land" the Puritans were strikingly confident about their adventure. Assured that they were transporting the Protestant Reformation to a new citadel in America, they projected their optimism onto the unknown soil of New England.

All kinds of reports, which circulated among the Puritan colonizers, extolled the beauty and plenty of New England. It was John Smith one of the first who wrote several brochures in 1616 in which he praised the fecundity of the American soil and its capacity to produce "any grain, fruits or seeds you will sow or plant" (Carroll, *op.cit.*, 9). The natural blessings of America, he continued, were so plentiful "that a hundred men may, in one hour or two, make their provisions for a day."

Although the Puritans were usually confident about the physical attributes of New England, they had serious doubts about its spiritual state, because they thought the Devil was lurking in the wilderness and it was also evident to them that America lacked all the blessings of Christianity. Consequently, this savage state of the wilderness signified for them Satan's world or the realm of the Antichrist. The inhabitants of that world, the Indians, were believed to be trapped in "the snare of the Devil" who, the Puritans felt, would use all his power to prevent the flourishing of Christianity into the wilderness. Mention should me made though, that the coming of Christian religion in Massachusetts meant also the desire to convert the Indians to Christianity. But, before this happened, they were decimated by the plague shortly before the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620. This epidemic was interpreted by John Cotton as a sign from God that He would have the English settle there (*ibidem,* 9-13).

***Billy Budd* – A Fictional Instance of Human Justice vs. Martial Justice**

Taking a somber tone regarding divine and human justice, the American novelist Herman Melville wrote a short novel, *Billy Budd* that quarrels with both human and divine justice, incorporating the classic trial scene to underline the theme. The author assumed of his audience an understanding of Biblical stories as well as much of English history. Shrinking the world of the drama to a single warship and narrowing humankind to the crew of this ship, he tries to capture the inexplicable need for law and the horror of enforcing it when the "criminals' " motives are benign. It is not just another run-of-the-mill courtroom drama, but a deeply philosophic study of unjust justice. In this case, the sacrificial victim, who is designated to satisfy the British Navy's concept of justice, is a young seaman named Billy Budd.

The story is introduced against a background that proves crucial in the shape of the story; it is set at a time in history when other mutinies have rocked the British Navy and officers are on the alert for signals of trouble. Billy appears on board a man-of-war, delighting most of the crew and the captain with his sunny manner. A handsome and innocent fellow, Billy has the appearance of an angel (as did the martyr Stephen, when he was stoned to death for preaching his faith). For various reasons, the master-at-arms, a man named Claggart, becomes passionately antagonistic to the handsome sailor: "To

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be nothing more than innocent!" (Melville, 1952: 37[1]) is his private meditation. Melville notes that Claggart has an "elemental evil" (*BB* 37) in him, "for which the Creator alone is responsible" (*BB* 37). His role is simply to express this evil.

Claggart acts in a friendly manner toward Billy while he secretly plots his destruction. He finally charges Billy with being the "one dangerous man aboard" (*BB* 52), insisting that Billy is planning an insurrection. Captain Vere cannot believe this, though other ships have quite recently faced mutinies. He confronts the young foretopman, who appears before him like "a statue of young Adam before the Fall" (*BB* 53). There is no clear evidence of Billy's religion; he is simply a natural innocent. Yet he has his flaws, a quick temper and a mighty fist. Though usually placid and loving, he cannot tolerate liars and lying. He also has a speech impediment that keeps him from explaining his innocence when false charges are brought against him. Thus, he suddenly strikes out at Claggart when he speaks his lies, killing him. Ironically, the false charges precipitate the violence – the murder of a superior officer – and insure that all the witnesses against Billy are credible. The Captain, himself a witness to the incident, serves as both the prosecutor and the judge, forced to find against Billy even though he sympathizes with his action. Billy is not a man of faith or a willing sacrifice. Nor is he innocent of the formal charge brought against him. Yet the acting out of this just-yet-unjust judgment has eerie parallels to the events leading up to the Crucifixion.

Here again the "system" destroys the innocent man: the Captain must punish Billy's violence in order to maintain order, especially at this particular time in naval history. Both he and the officers who sit in judgment with him are afraid that forgiving such a clear violation of the code of military justice will incite mutiny among the rest of the crew.

Melville fills the story with echoes of Hebrew sacrificial imagery (altars, priests, Abraham and Isaac, etc.) as well as the narratives of the Crucifixion (Billy's silence in the face of the accusation, his calm approach to death, his forgiving last words, even the hints that nature itself responds to the death). Yet the author, an interesting philosophical writer of the American Romantic period, who used his own sea-going experience in his longer study of life aboard a ship is hardly an orthodox Christian in his interpretation. Nancy M. Tischler considers that that Melville "appears to reject the idea of original sin, replacing it with psychological quirks and individual twists" (Tischler, 2007: 185). We quite disagree with this point of view since original sin, innate depravity, or the redemption of the preordained chosen ones are not necessarily exposed by Christian believers; they are simply archetypal, Biblical concepts taken as such, with no denominational bias involved. The chaplain is rendered mute in the face of this natural (and secular) saint. The only religion that enters the story is as a means to keep the crew in order. In fact, at the end of the story, Billy Budd himself has become the object of veneration and the subject of myth-making. Bits of the spar on which he was hanged become relics for the crew, like pieces of the true Cross. The crew finally contribute to the ballad that sailors sing about "Billy's last day." (*BB* 89)

The story challenges many ideas and images in scripture, conflating Adam and Christ in this simple figure of the Handsome Sailor. It points to the inherent evil of social mechanisms, which cannot take into account individual differences or consider

[1] In the text of the article the abbreviation *BB* will be mentioned parenthetically for the following edition of Herman Melville's *Selected Writings of Herman Melville: Complete Short Stories, Typee [and] Billy Budd, Foretopman*. New York: Modern Library, 1952.

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the innocent heart of the guilty man. The hero is a victim of justice, not a willing challenger of it. His inability to articulate his arguments, his silence in the face of lies make him a symbol of the period, a tragic "allegory of nineteenth century American society" – a piece of ironic social criticism (Tischler, *op.cit.,* 187).

My point has simply been that the idea of a 'book' is not something that comes to us innocent or empty-handed. On the contrary, it has been culturally conditioned by the historical presence of the Bible, and its relationship to subsequent thought in every particular and highly complex ways.

All in all, I find it appropriate to underline that most American stories reflect the tradition of Hebrew narrative. As a people who spent years in the constant struggle to settle the land, moving from the East coast to the West, Americans have resonated to the land-locked tales of the Bible.

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