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The Bard and the Bible

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Abstract

This essay reviews the use of the Bible (Old and New Testaments) as a source for creative writing, especially poetry, and provides a partial list of such derived material. It then proceeds to examine in some depth some of A. E. Housman's adaptations of individual phrases from the Bible, from which we proceed to the consideration of complete poems drawn from biblical sources. Housman was thoroughly versed in the Bible and used materials therefrom easily and originally. Five poems are carefully considered: one on Adam (with three other Adam poems touched on), one on Lot, one on the Exodus from Egypt, and two on the nature of Christ. What is clear from this examination is that Housman was accustomed to adapting such sources to his own purposes. His sympathies were engaged on the side of the transgressors who are punished by either divine or human authority, with whom he identified emotionally. As such, he could also identify with Christ, whom he presents as a human rather than a divine personage, just as he did with Adam, Lot, and Moses. This emotional bias towards the law-breaker can be traced to his own position as a homosexual in the aftermath of the Wilde trial.

The Bible (Old and New Testaments together) is not only a compendium of ancient Hebrew and Greek texts, including legend, history, poetry, law, short stories (for what else are the books of Ruth and Esther or the parables of Christ?) and the elements of the novel. The Old Testament comprises the national epic of the Jewish people, and the New the basis of one of the world's other great religions. It is also a source of non-religious inspiration to creative authors. Thomas Mann developed the skeletal story of Joseph into one of his greatest novels – *Joseph and His Brothers*. The same story was also the basis of a popular modern musical play – David Lloyd-Webber's *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat*.

The story of Noah, as well, was dramatized as a Broadway musical by Richard Rodgers as *Two By Two*. The story of Job served as the basis for Archibald MacLeish's philosophical play, *J.B.* And one need hardly mention the string of movies associated with the name of Cecil B. DeMille, the most enduring of which is *The Ten Commandments* with DeMille himself as the voice of God. Not even Shakespeare's plays and Greek mythology have inspired so many spin-offs into so many – and so varied – forms.

English authors have been inspired by the Bible from the earliest existence of English as a settled language, and before. Not much Anglo-Saxon poetry has survived, but among that poetry that has are poems on the fallen angels, the temptation and fall of man, Noah's flood, the parting of the Red Sea, and the Last Judgment. Chaucer, through the mouth of the Monk in *The Canterbury Tales*, recounted the stories of Lucifer, Adam, and Samson, as well as those of Alexander and Julius Caesar. Among the medieval uses of the Bible as a source for specifically English literature, one must also include the medieval mystery plays, growing out of the very early Latin *Quem Queritus* play. Many towns had their local versions (in English) of the cycle that began with the war in heaven between Satan and his followers on one side, and God, Christ, and the loyal angels on the other. The cycle continued through the entire pageant of the Biblical narrative and concluded with a group of plays based on the New Testament. This tradition of dramatic treatment of the Bible was continued by George Peele, a contemporary and rival of Shakespeare, who dramatized the story of David as *David and Bethsabe*. It is a tradition with deep roots that has continued to flourish.

Many novels, dramas, musical plays, and motion pictures have been drawn from the Bible. However, in volume, they cannot rival the sheer bulk of poetry drawn from this source. English poets from the beginning, as noted, have taken inspiration from the Bible. *Pride of place*, obviously, goes to John Milton, whose three most ambitious works stemmed from this source. I refer, of course, to *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*, based on the Old Testament, and *Paradise Regained*, drawn from the New Testament. But Milton was not alone. George Herbert and Christina Rossetti turned to the Bible as the source of "The Pulley" and "Eve," respectively. In *Hebrew Melodies*, Byron took up the story of King Saul in three separate poems, as well as writing a paean of triumph for the successful crossing of the Red Sea ("Sound the loud tumbrel"). Ralph Hodgson's "Eve" must be mentioned as well. Siegfried Sassoon wrote "Ancient History" in which he imagines Adam grown old. From the New Testament are derived "Journey of the Magi" by T. S. Eliot and "The Second Coming" by William Butler Yeats, among a myriad of others.

Nor is this use of the Bible confined to England. In North America, Emily Dickinson turned to the Bible as a source (“Abraham to kill him”). Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and John Greenleaf Whittier both wrote poems about the power and wisdom of King Solomon, and Longfellow also wrote a Nativity poem (“The Three Kings). Elinor Wylie, in addition to “Lucifer Sings in Secret,” also dealt with the Nativity and the Crucifixion (“Twelfth Night” and “Peter and John,” respectively). “A Ballad of Trees and the Master” was Sidney Lanier’s contribution to the genre. James Weldon Johnson gave us “The Creation,” the best known of his group of Negro sermon poems. Vachel Lindsay wrote “In Which Roosevelt Is Compared to Saul,” and a rather long – and rather pedestrian – “King David” was composed by Stephen Vincent Benet. Nor has this genre even begun to lose its vitality. One might also mention Karl Shapiro’s “The Recognition of Eve” and three of Delmore Schwartz’s poems (“Abraham,” “Sarah,” and “Jacob”). There are wonderful poems by, among others, Alicia Suskin Ostriker (“The Opinion of Hagar”) and Shirley Kaufman (“Leah”) and several others.

And this is hardly an exhaustive list. It excludes, for example, translations from the Hebrew, such as those of the Psalms crafted by Milton, among many others. I have mentioned only the best-known poems by the best-known poets. I have ignored poetry based on the ideas in the Bible, limiting myself to poems based on the narratives. Anyone who is interested can consult the anthologies *Chapter into Verse* (2 volumes edited by Robert Atwan and Laurence Wieder, published by Oxford University Press) and *Modern Poems on the Bible* (edited by David Curzon, published by the Jewish Publication Society). These anthologies include many (though by no means all) of the poems I have mentioned, and a great many more besides.

In addition to complete poems drawn from the Bible, there are a myriad single lines embedded in other poems, such as Wordsworth’s “Ruth amid the alien corn” in “The Solitary Reaper.” Such allusions, like the full poems, cannot be comprehended unless the reader has at least a fair knowledge of the source. There was a time when, although only the educated would know the classics of Greek and Latin literature, everyone from the illiterate rustic to the enthroned King – or Queen – knew the Bible thoroughly. That time has long passed, and today’s readers are dependant on learned footnotes for references that were once no mystery.

One poet who drew heavily on the Bible I have not mentioned because it is his poetry that I wish to discuss here in some depth. That poet is A. E. Housman (1859 – 1936).¹ From the Old Testament he took the bases for

¹ The poems are customarily designated by the name of the volume in which they appear and their place in that volume, the practice that I have followed here. The four collections are *A Shropshire Lad*, designated ASL, *Last Poems*, designated

four poems about Adam, a poem about Lot and his wife, and a poem about the Exodus from Egypt. Two more of his poems are drawn from the New Testament (“The Carpenter’s Son” and “Easter Hymn”). When one considers how few poems Housman wrote (even including his light verse, juvenilia, and the unpublished verses left in his manuscripts), this is a remarkable percentage of the whole. In addition, Biblical allusions, references, and partial quotations abound. “Dust’s your wages, son of sorrow” (ASL 44). “In the grave, they say, / Is neither knowledge nor device, / Nor thirteen pence a day” (LP 5). “Come to the stolen waters / Drink and your soul shall live” (MP 22). “The saviours come not home to-night: / Themselves they could not save” (ASL 1). “He . . . / Thinks, and remembers how he cleansed his heart / And washed his hands in innocence in vain” (MP 28). What does one make of these lines if one is completely unaware of the source on which these Housman quotations (chosen almost at random from among a far greater number) are based? At best, one misses their full import; at worst, such referential lines are meaningless.

Housman was a professional professor of Latin, the greatest Latinist of his own day and one of the greatest English Latinists who ever lived, and was equally competent in Greek. However, he drew far less heavily on what one would have thought were the more congenial sources of ancient mythology (although there are a few treatments of ancient myth as well as many semi-translations of Greek and Latin poetry embedded in his own poems) than he did on the Bible.

Housman’s familiarity with the Bible was not only intimate but also deep. His paternal grandfather was the Reverend Thomas Housman, and his maternal grandfather was the Reverend John Williams. Both were active, practicing ministers in the Church of England. His was a devoutly Anglican family in which daily family prayers included Bible reading. The family also attended church regularly, twice on Sundays, at his grandfather Thomas Housman’s church. At school, too, chapel attendance – with its attendant Bible reading – was part of the normal routine. Thus, Housman absorbed the Bible as young people today absorb song lyrics and advertising slogans. Its texts were retained by a ready mind and could be, perhaps even unconsciously, called upon for metaphor and symbol. And they could be so used with complete confidence that they would easily be understood by almost all. One should note that Hardy’s characters, even (or

LP, *More Poems*, designated MP, and *Additional Poems*, designated AP. Poems not included in these collections are to be found in *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, ed. Archie Burnett, Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1997. I have used the Burnett text (designated ‘Burnett’) for all citations, with one exception to be noted in the appropriate place.

perhaps especially) those from the lowest levels of society, constantly quote (and sometimes misquote) from the Bible, apply these quotations to their own lives, and argue about the significance and real meaning of various passages. This goes to prove just how pervasive knowledge of the Bible was at all levels of society in Queen Victoria's England. Thus, such Biblical allusions and references were as natural to Housman as breathing. He handled them easily, and he brought the same familiarity and ease to his treatment of full narratives.

Everyone interested in the poetry of A. E. Housman is aware that he habitually took phrases or verses from the Bible, slightly altered the text or the context, and thus twisted the Biblical verse, adapting it to his own use. As early as 1942, G. B. A. Fletcher pointed out that the "saviours" line above (ASL 1) echoed Matthew xxvii.42 and Mark xv.31 ("He saved others; himself he cannot save").² Housman's line, however, refers not to Christ but to active-duty soldiers who were killed in battle, and implies either that the common soldiers were collectively Christ or that Christ was a common soldier in God's army. Either interpretation 'twists' the Biblical reference. Fletcher also noted that the "in the grave" quotation above (LP 5) is based on Ecclesiastes ix.10 ("For there is no work nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave." But again there is a twist, for Housman adds the "thirteen pence a day" (the soldier's wages) to the 'knowledge' and 'device' which are lacking "in the grave." This addition incorporates humdrum reality into the elevated philosophy of Ecclesiastes, equating a soldier's modest daily ration with the wisdom of the ages and thus, by implication, deflating the value of wisdom, knowledge, etc., to the meager wages of a common soldier. The hand-washing line above (MP 28), Fletcher remarked, echoes Psalms lxxiii.3-4: "Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart, and washed my hands in innocency." However, Fletcher seems not to have noticed that the echo from the Psalms also refers to Pontius Pilate, who symbolically washed his hands of guilt, thus declaring his own innocence.

The "waters" quote above (MP 22) was examined by Charles Mounts, who noted that the source of the image is Isaiah lv.1-3, where we find "Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters . . . Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live." He says that Housman "has seized upon an idealistic outcry of the Hebrew prophet as the springboard

² G. B. A. Fletcher (1942). *Reminiscences in Housman's poetry*. Appendix III of Grant Richards, *Housman 1897-1936*, pp. 399-400. New York: Oxford University Press.

for a *carpe diem* justification of an illicit amour.”³ The waters are from Isaiah, but those waters are the waters of salvation and need not be “stolen.” They are combined with the waters from Proverbs ix.17 (“stolen waters are sweet”). These waters are proverbially the waters of carnal indulgence. In this Scriptural twisting, Housman proclaims the desirability of drinking the “stolen waters,” whatever the penalty. We know that the penalty for indulgence in Housman’s waters was imprisonment, possibly death, and eternity in hell. Nevertheless, drinking them will give life to the soul. If one is dying of thirst, one has to choose between drinking the “stolen waters,” despite the penalties should one be caught, and enduring ‘a living death’, a life deprived of all that makes life meaningful and worth living. Hell in this life might be worth the price if it purchases eternity in heaven, and heaven in this life waived in fear of an afterlife in hell – provided one believed in both. Housman rejected the paradigm of heaven and hell. He believed that death would be followed only by oblivion. The “carnal indulgence” of the Proverbial waters was not that of “an illicit amour,” which might be secret, but of a homosexual passion, the penalty for which, in the years following the Oscar Wilde trial, was only too obvious and probable. To conflate Isaiah’s waters with those of Proverbs and then defiantly recommend drinking them is a *tour de force* of Biblical inversion.

Davis P. Harding took up what he called “Housman’s most interesting experiment with biblical materials.”⁴ He notes the origin of the *carpe diem* theme in general in Chapter 12 of Ecclesiastes and points out that Housman in the poem in question made this origin patent by inserting in the eighth line of his own poem another phrase from Ecclesiastes *verbatim*: “desire should fail.” The Biblical ‘desire’, however, is general, whereas Housman’s is very specifically the ‘desire’ engendered by the “stolen waters,” carnal desire for homosexual union. Isaiah begs his hearers to forego sin and consider the future – not the present – world, to drink the waters of eternal salvation. Housman opts for the Proverbial “stolen waters” of illicit fleshly pleasures in this world. Here, as was his usual practice, Housman exploited “Biblical phrases of affirmation to achieve ironic negation.”⁵

Another example, as Friemarck points out, occurs when, in Housman’s “If it chance your eye offend you” (ASL 45) we find a “cynical endorsement of Jesus’ admonition to sever from oneself the offending eye or hand or foot”

³ Charles Mounts (1940). Housman’s twisting of scripture. *Modern Language Notes*, March, 186.

⁴ Davis P. Harding (1946). A note on Housman’s use of the Bible. *Modern Language Notes*, March, 205-207.

⁵ Vincent Friemarck (1952). Further notes on Housman’s use of the Bible. *Modern Language Notes*, December, 548-50.

(Matthew v.29-30, Matthew xviii.8-9, and Mark ix.43-47). Using this rationale, the poem applauds the young – probably homosexual – man who committed suicide as he considered that the source of his “sickness” was his soul. It should not be necessary to add that the poem is ironic, yet Friemarck does not seem to be aware of this, finding “something sophomoric about Housman’s apparent determination to distort zealous precepts and discredit pious attitudes.” In general, his Biblical echoes have a dual effect; the rejection of formal religious tenets “emphasizes the misery of the human lot.” Here, I take issue with Friemarck. While his remarks are true of some poems, at least as often such echoes serve to stress the *nobility* of humanity, as in the “saviour” quotation above, or these magnificent lines: “What found he [God] that the heavens stand fast? / What pillar proven firm at last / Bears up so light the world-seen span? / The heart of man, the heart of man.” For in Housman, ultimately, it is man who “in the day when heaven was falling, / The hour when earth’s foundations fled, / . . . held the sky suspended; . . . And saved the sum of things” (AP 15).

It was not only excerpts and isolated phrases that Housman used both to reject dogma and to exalt humanity’s place in the scheme of things. I turn now to his treatment of complete narratives, where he throws new light onto old stories.⁶ Where there was coercion, Housman was instinctively ‘on the side of the coerced’, subject to rules about which they had not been consulted and the reasons for which they did not understand. In the Bible there are several stories that center on the necessity to acquiesce to God’s commandments on obedience to – or failure to obey – instructions from the Deity.

The first story in the Bible hinges on this point. I refer, of course, to the story of Adam and Eve. Housman was so attracted to this story that there are four separate lyrics about it. One is in the mode of light verse. It consists of a blank rectangle in which, we are informed, would be shown Adam and Eve before they ate the fruit were it not that their complete and unashamed nakedness makes them an unsuitable subject for art (Burnett, p. 264). The second ascribes the Fall to the fact that, forced to choose between pleasing his wife and pleasing God “’twas hopeless odds.” Had he had a male friend to advise him, the verse implies, the result would have been different (Burnett, p. 175). The third lays all blame where it has

⁶ Much, although by no means all, of the following material has previously been assessed in: Carol Efrati (2000). A. E. Housman’s use of biblical narrative. In: Alan W. Holden & J. Roy Birch (Eds.), *A. E. Housman: A reassessment*, pp. 188-209. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd. Additional material has also been incorporated in the current article.

traditionally been set, on Eve, who “from scenes of bliss / Transported him for life” (Burnett, p. 257). It is the fourth, Housman’s only fully serious treatment of the story, that concerns me here. In this poem, Housman follows Herbert’s lead in “The Pulley,” where God withholds contentment from the creature he has made although bestowing upon him all other blessings. Although Adam may be considered one of the two original sinners, preceded by a few minutes by Eve, Housman does not deal with the disobedience itself. He focuses instead on the cause thereof: not Eve, but a more generalized discontent. This is one of the very few of Housman’s poems that has not been the subject of at least some (and in many cases, a great deal of) critical analysis. In this poem, Housman suggests that it is not true that before eating the fruit Adam was constantly happy, since “The heart of man, for all they say, / Was never happy long” (AP 3). His soul is unsuited to stasis and demands change. Adam, the poem implies, knowingly ate the fruit out of sheer boredom with his monotonous life, being “tired of rest.” His soul “aches to be away.”

Since God created Adam and established his nature, this inherent restlessness is of divine origin. God must have incorporated it into Adam’s nature when creating man. On this basis, Housman calls into question the traditional interpretation of the Bible. Adam, the prototype of all men, found (as do all men) that at best, complete happiness is temporary. Whatever one has, no matter how pleased with it at first, eventually one feels the itch to ‘improve’ it, to add to it, to alter it. Nothing remains satisfying ‘as is’. Thus, eating the fruit of the tree did not, in the final analysis, cause Adam’s departure from Eden. Rather, it was his basically, and eternally, restless and curious nature that caused him to eat the fruit. Housman suggests that Adam was discontented with paradise itself in the same way as men today are discontented with their condition, and this modern ‘lack of content’ reflects and continues that of Adam. It is the natural state of humanity. After a certain term there is a need to try something new. Adam himself was ready to leave Eden. This treatment stands the scriptural account on its head by reversing the tenor, the motive, and the entire thrust of the story. This is precisely what Housman habitually did with Biblical material.

Like the story of Adam, which apparently appealed greatly to Housman, that of Lot and his wife involves the disastrous consequences of disobedience to God. Housman used this story as the basis for one of his most haunting poems (MP 35), a poem that, as usual with Housman’s lyrics, appears to be easy to read when in fact it is only easy to misread. In Raymond Mortimer’s opinion, it is only “a witty epigram on Noah [sic], . . . who fled the sinful cities of the plain only to fall, on a mountain, into

incest.”⁷ This comment about a poem manifestly about Lot rather than Noah provides ample proof, if any were needed, of the confusion created when readers who do not know the Bible well, if at all, attempt to make sense of poetry based on the Scriptures. Mortimer, it seems, recognized that there was a Biblical reference. However, he did not know the story of Lot and his wife, who was turned into a pillar of salt. He was acquainted with Noah, so Mortimer assumed the poem was based on the story with which he was familiar, even though the details enumerated in the poem have no relevance to the Ark story. The poem specifies that “the woman made her endless halt” at the mid-point of a journey because she broke a single commandment. She stands “today, a glistening token, / . . . in the wilderness of salt.” Behind her was devastation when “thick the brimstone snowed.” “He” continued on his way “to the hill of his undoing.” Every reference is clear when applied to the story of Lot and his wife, and there is no detail that matches the story of Noah except that he proceeded to a mountain where he was undone. Thus, out of what was probably sheer ignorance, Mortimer proceeded to substitute Noah for Lot, Mt. Ararat in Turkey for the hill in the Negev where Lot was seduced by his daughters, and the destroyed cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for the nameless cities annihilated by Noah’s flood.

The poem itself is far more than “a witty epigram.” The text is clear but for full understanding it is necessary to keep in mind not only the bare bones of the story but also how Housman uses it. The story, in brief, is that Lot, having been warned of the coming destruction of Sodom, the city where he lives, leaves with his wife and daughters. He has also been warned not to look back and so instructs his family. They are well on their way when Lot’s wife, despite the commandment not to look back, does precisely that. As a punishment, she is turned into a pillar of salt on the shore of the Dead Sea. This may, perhaps, seem a rather excessive punishment for her yielding to the desire to take a last look of farewell at her home at the moment of its destruction. One of the points the poem makes, then, is that punishment is a consequence of the act of disobedience and has nothing to do with either the importance or the rationality of the command being disobeyed.

His wife having been ‘salted’ and preserved for eternity, Lot continues to the hill where he meets his own fate. What he does there is far more heinous than what his wife had done, but there seems to be no horrendous external penalty for his transgression. His daughters, thinking all of mankind save themselves had been destroyed, decide it is their duty to

⁷ Raymond Mortimer (1936). Housman relics. *The New Statesman and Nation* XII, 24 October, 631 & 634.

propagate the race. Since their father is (so far as they know) the only surviving male, they ply him with wine until he is drunk and then seduce him. Drunkenness may not be a virtue, but there is no specific prohibition against it. There are certainly, however, the strongest possible strictures against father-daughter incest, yet no punishment is recorded for either the daughters, who 'engineered' the sin, or for Lot himself, the unwitting sinner. Lot, of course, may suffer from a guilty conscience, but if so it is not mentioned in the Bible. And his daughters, far from being stricken with sterility or subjected to any other punishment for their sin, succeed. The children they bear to their father eventually become the people of Moab. Nor are the children of this forbidden union cursed, for among them Ruth is eventually born, who in due course becomes the progenitor of the House of David from whose stock the messiah is to come. One might even argue, then, that Lot's transgression is an essential element in God's plan. His wife had to be removed from the scene, ostensibly in punishment for a technical sin, in order to leave him free to commit a real sin which is a prerequisite for God's program. The folk etymology holds that 'Moab' is derived from the Hebrew for 'from the father'. This raises the intriguing question whether Housman knew Hebrew and was aware of this folk etymology or could have derived it for himself. There is no hard evidence either way, but there are some tantalizing indications that he may have had at least a nodding acquaintance with Hebrew, and perhaps more.⁸ In any case, as with Adam, Housman patently identifies with the transgressor. It is important to note that Lot is not identified by name. Lot is simply "he," a type of Everyman. Likewise, his wife is depersonalized and called only "the woman," a type of Everywoman. Nor is the "one commandment broken" specified. It functions as a type of Everylaw. One might argue, of course, that none of these needed to be specified as Housman might assume Everyreader was as familiar with the Bible as he was. But it can also be argued that as the theme is "transgression and punishment," the specific identities of those involved is immaterial. It matters not who broke what law. What does matter is simply that some law was broken. Punishment for disobedience is inevitable even if the prohibition is a minor one. Unlike the bulk of the commandments that govern interpersonal relationships, the prohibition in the case of Lot and his family involves only two parties: God, Who lays down the law, and man, who obeys the law – or not, in which case he is punished one way or another. The relationship posited between God and man is one of complete dominance and unquestioning obedience. Disobedience brings down on the offender's head, in this case not "jail and gallows and hell-fire" (LP 12) but a

⁸ For a review of the evidence and indications, see Carol Efrati (1999). A. E. Housman's knowledge of Hebrew. *Housman Society Journal* XXV, 83-87.

metamorphosis even more extreme than those recounted by Ovid. Lot's wife is not metamorphosed from one sentient form into another; she is mineralized.

And what of Lot? He did not look back. He did not disobey the commandment, and yet it is "to the hill of his undoing" that he proceeds. What does the subtext imply? She breaks the commandment; he keeps it. Yet both are "undone" in some way. Doom is visited equally on those who obey and those who do not, so why should one obey? This is antinomianism, the idea that those who possess 'grace' are exempt from moral laws and those who do not are doomed no matter how upright their lives. This is a specifically Christian heresy, and as such is not applicable to the characters in the poem, who are the close kin of the Patriarch Abraham. Nor is it applicable to Housman, who not only declared himself an atheist but also specifically rejected the premises of Christianity, as we shall see. Thus, it seems to me that this term cannot be applied to either this particular poem or to its author. In any case, to me this does not seem to be a satisfactory reading of the poem.

Here is another possible subtext. The woman broke the commandment. As a consequence, she was prevented from remaining at his side. Her very absence causes his downfall as well (and again, the details of "his undoing" are not specified). She is, therefore, doubly responsible – the source not only of her own sin but of his, as well. Lot's wife is, thus, an antetype of Eve. Her role as Everywoman means that she is guilty of Lot's fall. I believe that Housman would have considered this reading simplistic and rejected it with scorn.

However one interprets the subtext, his "undoing" was clearly the result not of his own actions, but of those of another. He is guiltless, yet he is punished. But is he, indeed, guiltless? Does the poem imply that he should have stayed with his wife, camped perpetually next to the pillar of salt, rather than continuing his journey? The very verbalization of the idea exposes its puerility. It is even less satisfactory than the first two readings already rejected.

There is yet another way of looking at the subtext which I find satisfying. The woman comes to a dead stop because she has looked back. The man heads for disaster because he does not look back.

An exclusive focus on the past, whether spatially or temporally, results in paralysis – in complete inability to move forward. As Flieger has remarked, "to look back with regret, like Lot's wife, is to risk losing the capacity and the will to go forward."⁹ However, a refusal to contemplate the past at all is the forerunner of calamity. To proceed focusing exclusively on what is

⁹ Verlyn Flieger (1963). *Splintered light: Logos and language in Tolkien's world*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. Eerdmans, p. 155.

ahead, whether spatially or temporally – rejecting all that lies behind instead of assimilating it – constitutes a loss of the wisdom and experience that enables one to proceed confidently but not rashly into the future. This reading implies that she could not go forward because she was focused on the past and he, by turning his back on the past, could do nothing but proceed blindly to his doom. Being tethered to the past and ignoring the past are equivalent formulae for “undoing.”

What, exactly, is meant by the term ‘undoing’? It can be read in more than one way. Textually, it refers to the hill where ‘he’ will meet disaster. However, ‘undoing’ also means ‘disrobing’ or opening one’s clothing. When King Lear says, “I pray you, undo this button,” the latter meaning is clearly the appropriate one. That reading here implies either Lot’s nudity or, at the least, the loosening of his clothing and possibly with that the loosening of all behavioral strictures. This takes us directly back to the source, where the ‘undoing’ of his clothing is the prelude to the ‘undoing’ of Lot, an ‘undoing’ which eventuates in the coming of King David. This reading provides ambiguity and ambivalence, two of the hallmarks of Housman’s poetry, and has the true Housmanian resonance.

Both ambiguity and ambivalence concerning the customs of Sodom are neatly reflected in a letter Housman wrote to his publisher, Grant Richards, who had passed on a request to include some of Housman’s poetry in a projected anthology of poetry of the 1890s:

To include me in an anthology of the nineties would be just as technically correct, and just as essentially inappropriate, as to include Lot in a book on Sodomites; in saying which I am not saying a word against Sodomy, nor implying that intoxication and incest are in any way preferable.¹⁰

Here, if not in the poem, Housman specifies the nature of Lot’s ‘undoing’: intoxication and incest. These ‘sins’ are placed in the same category as sodomy. This letter is the nearest Housman ever approached to a public acknowledgement of his own ‘sin’, and its jocular tone implicitly prevents anyone’s applying it to himself.

What seems to be implied in the poem is that Lot’s actions were just as sinful, or just as ‘non-sinful’ as those of the men of Sodom who were destroyed for their sins. ‘He’ succumbs to drink and sexual temptation, and is thus no better than the Sodomites. His susceptibility is inherent in his basic nature and is activated on ‘the hill of his undoing’ where it, indeed, ‘undoes’ him.

¹⁰ A. E. Housman. Letter to Grant Richards, 9 October 1928. In: Henry Maas (Ed.) (1971). *The Letters of A. E. Housman*, p. 271. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.

It is not only 'he' and 'the woman' who are punished for transgression. So is the earth in general, for Sodom is in no way identified as a city. Once more, the poem focuses on the punishment rather than on the transgression. But the brimstone that 'snowed' on the unidentified place and the woman 'in the wilderness of salt' have a single common characteristic that links them. Both snow and salt are white. But traditionally, white symbolizes purity and innocence. Once more, the accepted story is reversed by this color symbolism – the subtext subtly absolving both 'the woman' and the place of guilt. If they are white, they are innocent and undeserving of punishment and are made to suffer gratuitously, whereas 'he', who is undone and presumably guilty, is not punished at all. The subtext thus indicates that there is a fundamental flaw in God's justice, which is, in fact, unjust.

However we approach the lyric, the conclusion is the same: Housman has altered a black-and-white story of sin and punishment into a tale replete with various shades of gray, raising questions about transgression and punishment, their relationship to each other, and their rationale. He has replaced utter clarity with ambivalent ambiguity.

The text I am using as the basis for my commentary on the following poem, MP 2 ("When Israel out of Egypt came") is not that printed by Burnett. I have chosen, in regards to this poem, to use the more traditional text in the version posthumously presented by the dead poet's brother, Laurence Housman.¹¹ The text was never finalized by the poet himself, so there is a textual problem. His brother printed the poem on the basis of Housman's notebooks as an 8-verse composition. Most editions remove the last verse as not in truth part of the poem and print the lyric as a 7-verse composition. Burnett excludes, in addition to Laurence Housman's last verse, the two verses customarily printed as the penultimate and final verse and prints the poem as a 5-verse composition. As my purpose is to examine what Housman did with his Biblically-derived material, I am returning to the poem as first printed by Laurence Housman.¹²

The poem, in the original form that I am using, has four divisions. The first two verses, what I am calling the Prologue, recount in straightforward but highly compressed and allusive form the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The details all refer to and recall specific incidents in the journey from Egypt to Mt. Sinai. In the first verse are mentioned the crossing of the Red Sea and the two pillars, that of cloud by day and that of fire by night, which

¹¹ A. E. Housman. *More poems*. Laurence Housman (Ed.) (1936). London: Jonathan Cape; New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

¹² Those who are interested in the textual problem should consult Burnett's edition, which canvasses the question. He presents his rationale on pp. 419-20.

guided the children of Israel. The second verse reverts to the crossing, and then, in two extremely condensed lines, lists the other salient factors of the journey: "He [God] brought them . . . / Past sword and famine, rock and sand, / Lust and rebellion, home." Each of these single words evokes one or more significant episodes. 'Sword' symbolizes external threats and refers us back to Pharaoh's army as well as Amalek. "Famine, rock and sand" suggest natural threats. "Famine" refers us to God's provision of both quails and manna. "Rock" reminds us not only of the desert setting but of the miracle in which God caused water to gush from the rock. And "sand" evokes the barren landscape through which the people traveled. "Lust" suggests the proscribed pagan fertility rites associated with the golden calf episode which, at first glance, appears to be silently omitted but is in fact implicit in the reference. "Rebellion" is perhaps the most complex word in this mnemonic shorthand. The manuscript indicates an open choice between 'rebellion' and 'idolatry'.¹³

'Rebellion' refers to several separate events for which, without it, there is no referent, but 'idolatry' can only refer to the golden calf episode already implicit in 'lust' and so is redundant. 'Rebellion' suggests the internal rebellions which roiled the tribe, in which first the sons of Korah, then Aaron and Miriam, and lastly the sons of Aaron tried to substitute their authority for that of Moses. But it also refers back to the "rock" and Moses's own rebellion against God's commandment. In Numbers xx.8-12, we read that God instructed Moses to speak to the rock, which would then emit water, but Moses instead twice struck the rock with his staff. For this disobedience he was punished, and his punishment is, in this poem, the heart of the story: "And the Lord spake unto Moses . . . Because ye believed me not . . . therefore ye shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them." "Given them," but not given you. Moses is barred from the Promised Land as a punishment for his rebellion. Although God will lead his people "home," Moses will not be among them. Another will replace him.

These events are not evoked in chronological order. Instead, they work inward from the *active* enemy through the suffering inflicted by a *passive* nature, through tribal unrest, individual defiance, and finally Moses's own sin in rebelling against God by striking the rock. This Prologue is followed by the persona/narrator's reflections on the personal significance of these events, and Moses's punishment acts as an emotional cord that links the prophet of the Exodus to the poet of the lyric.

¹³ The manuscript remnants are now in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. The particular manuscript sheet in question is designated A-2, sheet 2.

The historico-biblical Prologue segues into the personal focus of the remainder of the poem, however it is printed. It does not cut off abruptly but is gradually, in the next two verses, replaced by a concentration on the personal ramifications of the story for the poet. In these verses, Mt. Sinai (alternatively Mt. Horeb) is the specific locale. The shofar is blown, but "I never over Horeb heard / the blast of Advent blow." The Torah (the 'way') is given, but "No fire-faced prophet brought me word / Which way behoved me go." And, following the giving of the Torah, all direct manifestations of God – the cloud, the fire, and the thunder – cease. Israel, assembled at the foot of Mt. Sinai, can no longer see the tokens of God's presence, which previously were present to sight and hearing, but "The tokens that to Israel came, / To me they have not come." These "tokens" may have vanished from the perceptions of Israel, but they have never appeared at all to the narrator. He was not at Sinai.

The third movement begins with the fifth verse. It segues again, this time from Mt. Sinai to Mt. Nebo, from the collective tribal Israel to the isolated individual "I," and from Moses at the height of his powers to Moses, old and dying, who is then conflated with the authorial "I," the poet-persona. Moses, from Mt. Nebo, could look upon the Promised Land for which he hungered and from which he was barred because he had transgressed, disobeying God's express orders. "The heart goes where no footstep may/ Into the promised land." The land would be entered, but not by him. He would die, alone on Mt. Nebo, his face still turned to the land: "The realm I look upon and die." The poet/persona identifies himself with the dying prophet, permitted to gaze upon, forbidden to touch or enter, the land of promise. In these verses can be heard the voice of the dying Moses filtered through the consciousness of the living persona, and the prophet modulates into the poet.

If Moses had seen a land of bliss that was forbidden him, so had Housman, and his "promised land" too was forbidden him by God. The man Housman loved passionately all his life was as barred to him as Canaan was to Moses, and like Moses he could only "stand and gaze" (AP 7). The man he loved was also named Moses, and in his identification with the Moses of the Exodus from Egypt, Housman could symbolically unite himself with Moses's modern namesake.

At this point the fourth movement begins. The focus narrows and only the persona is left, contemplating his own death. The Biblical Moses's "inheritance" is a living people, but the persona's is "the nation that is not," the nonexistent, the dead, the unbegotten. In that moot last verse, he invokes the same nonexistence for himself, the dissolution of all that is human ("nerve and heart and brain"). What remains is to be absorbed into the sterility of dust, sand, and ash, which return us to the (now) burnt-out

fire and the desert of the Prologue. This creates a frame, for the desert surrounds the oasis as the desert sands of the prologue and close surround the religious and personal reflections of the poem in which prophet, persona, and poet are merged. And that is why I disagree with Burnett and most other editors and accept Laurence Housman's opinion that the last, disputed, verse is indeed a part of the poem. Nor am I alone, for Philip Gardner calls it the "last, and perhaps most beautiful stanza," and comments that removing it has resulted in "a poem which . . . ends abruptly where it once ended perfectly."¹⁴ Indeed, in my opinion this disputed verse is essential to the poem structurally, linguistically, and psychologically. The poem can be read simply – or perhaps not so simply – as a poem of abandonment and dispossession. It embodies the yearning for that which can only be attained in the world of imagination and dream, something that logically can never be. On one level, we have a poem about exile. Tom Burns Haber connected this poem to the despair Housman felt when his mother died on his twelfth birthday and his consequent feeling that God had denied him guidance and sustenance and had, in fact, abandoned him.¹⁵ Whether this contributed to the emotional sub-stratum of the poem or not, there are two other – and far more appropriate – sources for both the imagery and the underlying philosophy: the Bible itself and the Rabbinical commentary, with which it is not impossible that Housman was acquainted. In the poem, "Ascended is the cloudy flame, / The mount of thunder dumb." God has withdrawn his direct presence in the world. He has become the hidden God of Deuteronomy xxxi.17-18 and 45: "I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them . . . And I will surely hide my face" so it is possible to say, "Thou art a God that hideth thyself." There are no more miracles. Man has been left alone without overt divine guidance. It at least seems that God has abandoned his creation. Housman, in the poem, not only seems to conflate himself with the Biblical prophet but also with the people of Israel as a whole, a people dispossessed, fated to endure a long – perhaps an eternal – exile from their promised land. He sees his "inheritance amid / The nation that is not," which may be read as "the nation of the dead, the nonexistent, the unborn." It may also be read as "the nation that is not a nation, that lacks the stigmata of nationhood," the nation in eternal exile, the children of Israel dispersed, scorned, apparently abandoned by God as Housman felt he had been abandoned by the man he loved, his own personal god. In some way, I think, Housman

¹⁴ Philip Gardner (Ed.) (1992). *A. E. Housman: The critical heritage*, pp. 38 & 54, n. 88. London: Routledge.

¹⁵ Tom Burns Haber (1967). *A. E. Housman*, p. 31. Boston: Twayne.

felt emotionally akin to the nation that stood (at that time at least) as the paradigm of dispossession.

The poems addressed above are all drawn from Old Testament narrative, and in each case a careful reading reveals an iconoclastic subtext, at least from the point of view of conventional middle-class Christianity. It is worth noting that Housman himself never published any of these poems, perhaps because they embody some extremely personal elements, perhaps because he was not completely satisfied with them, and perhaps because they were too explicitly opposed to the customary interpretations of the age. Or perhaps there were other reasons. Speculation on this point is idle. His brother certainly was under the impression that Housman intended posthumous publication of these poems, and of lyrics far more personally revealing than any of these.¹⁶

In dealing with materials from the New Testament, Housman was even more iconoclastic. One of the two poems thus derived was, again, not published in his lifetime but left to his brother to usher into public print. In the other, which Housman included in *A Shropshire Lad*, he was extremely careful to conceal what he was doing, providing an elaborate mask for the subtext. Indeed, most readers even today miss the presence of the subtext entirely. It is just as well that Housman so thoroughly obscured it, as the poem is a denial of the Incarnation, the very basis of Christianity. I am referring to "The Carpenter's Son," ASL 47.

The obfuscation of the subtext begins with the ambiguous title. It is, as are so many of his titles, equivocal. The text is as deliberately misleading as the title, and the way is open for many possible interpretations, all erroneous. We can begin with the mode of execution, the hyphenated "gallows-tree." The gallows seems a specific contemporary reference. It appears more than once in Housman's poetry. In ASL 9, for example, we find a young man in Shrewsbury jail "naked to the hangman's noose" who will be hung at 8:00 AM when "sharp the link of life will snap, and dead on air will stand" the condemned man. In "Eight o'Clock (LP 15) is another condemned man "strapped, noosed, nighing his hour." The existence of numerous convicted felons in Housman's poetry has not gone unnoticed, and the titular figure of "The Carpenter's Son" seems quite at home among them. He, too, will die on the gallows. Or will he? For this is not merely a gallows, but a "gallows-tree," and another word for the Cross is 'the Tree'. By conflating the less common designation of the cross with the current mode of execution,

¹⁶ See Laurence Housman. A. E. Housman's *De Amicitia*. Annotated by John Carter, and including excerpts from Housman's diary, *Encounter* 29 (October 1967), pp. 33-41, for Laurence Housman's rationale in publishing these revealing poems.

Housman neatly sidesteps the necessity to make the reference clear. Let he who understands understand, and 'the let shall keep as they are'. The character will dangle on the gallows-tree, where he will be hung high. Both verbs obviously are appropriate to the gallows, but they are equally applicable to the cross.

The character "hangs for love," but would not do so had he "but left ill alone." The phrases introduce more – and more complex – ambiguities. What is the "love" for which he will hang? The first assumption might be that he is a rapist-murderer or, at least, a seducer of young girls. Or it could be love of money, and the condemned man a thief or embezzler. Or it could be love of a parent suffering from a painful and incurable disease, whom he had killed from compassion. Further thought might make one wonder if this is a case of "the love that dare not speak its name,"¹⁷ but that is probably the least likely idea that will occur to most people. As Keith Jebb has pointed out, the "ill" that the speaker could not "leave alone" "seems to have been love [but] what that love is we are not told."¹⁸ And yet, an underground tradition that Christ was homosexual has long persisted, especially among homosexual men. This idea is so shocking that it seldom emerges from the underground. When it is voiced publicly (as in San Francisco some years ago), it sparked riots. However, this may be the "love" mentioned – but unspecified – in the poem. The mainstream contention is, of course, that Christ died for love of mankind rather than of men, so by leaving the word "love" in a vacuum, and thus unspecified, Housman leaves the reader free to draw his own conclusions.

I do not intend to imply that no one ever noticed the Christ parallels. On the contrary. A. F. Allison thought the poem was "ridiculous in character and situation,"¹⁹ and C. B. Tinker castigated it as a "horrible burlesque of the Crucifixion."²⁰ Some critics were more temperate. Norman Marlow commented on the "ironic twist" Housman imparted to the familiar phrase, "leave well enough alone," and said that this creates a paradox. He was, however, silent about the nature of that resulting paradox.²¹ Nesca Robb

¹⁷ The phrase is from Lord Alfred Douglas' poem "Two Loves." In: Stephen Coote (Ed.) (1986). *The Penguin book of homosexual verse*, 2nd ed., pp. 262-64. London: Penguin Books.

¹⁸ Keith Jebb (1992). *A. E. Housman*, p. 82. Bridgend, Mid-Glamorgan: Seren Books.

¹⁹ A. F. Allison (1943). The poetry of A. E. Housman. *Review of English Studies*, 19, 276-84.

²⁰ C. B. Tinker (1935). Housman's poetry. *Yale Review* XXV, Autumn, 84-95.

²¹ Norman Marlow (1958). *A. E. Housman: Scholar and poet*, pp. 147-48. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

found in the poem a “startling reminiscence of Calvary” but did not pursue the matter further.²²

On the other hand, S. G. Andrews twisted the poem as thoroughly as Housman twisted the Bible. He pointed out that the common function of allusion is to make the unfamiliar familiar, which is true enough if a bit obvious. He then proceeded to remark that in this poem, the “key motifs and details which parallel the story of Christ” – his being a carpenter’s son executed between two thieves “for love” – function not to familiarize the strange but rather to de-familiarize what is familiar. Up to this point, there is nothing with which to disagree. Andrews then slid out of commentary and into polemic. He stated that whereas Christ “died for all mankind, the eponymous hero here had committed some crime of passion” that shifted the nature of the parallel. Andrews, needless to say, did not intend the religious meaning of ‘Passion’, nor did he note that, as remarked above, there is nothing in the text to characterize the “love” for which the character is to be executed. He then proceeded to claim that the “repeated allusions to Christ do not help us to understand the carpenter’s son or his fate. Instead, they encourage us to transfer the speech . . . to the mouth of Christ and to search for a sense in which that speech might apply to him.”²³

It would be as well here to quote the relevant part of the speech in question:

Oh, at home had I but stayed
'Prenticed to my father's trade,
Had I stuck to plane and adze,
I had not been lost, my lads.

* * * * *

Had I but left ill alone.

Andrews’s conclusion was that the poem suggests that one must learn to accept evil and suffering philosophically. He suggested that this idea is “developed by means of an unusual use of allusion” that does not clarify the carpenter’s son but instead “reinterprets the significance of the Crucifixion” by suggesting that the relevant lesson is the futility of combating evil. Practical, realistic people will “learn to accept it [evil] as an inevitable condition in an imperfect universe.” Andrews was incandescent with outrage at such an idea. He had suggested the “search for a sense in which that speech might apply to him,” Christ, but was side-tracked by his search for a theological rather than a human sense.

What all of these interpretations have in common is that they separate the titular carpenter’s son from Christ and then regard the poem as “burlesque.”

²² Nesca Robb (1948). *Four in exile*, p. 21. Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press.

²³ S. G. Andrews (1960). No title, *Explicator*, October.

allusion, or parallel. It apparently does not occur to them that the characters should not be separated because there are not two characters but only one. The poem is simply a treatment of the Crucifixion itself, not a parallel suggested by allusion. The titular character is in fact Christ. Tom Burns Haber, who understood this, called the poem “an affront to orthodoxy,”²⁴ and he was, from the Christian point of view, correct. Indeed, as Phelps noted, the poem is detached “not only from conventional religious belief but from conventional reverence.”²⁵ This may not be particularly specific, but it is to the point. The poem is not conventional in reference to either religious dogma or Christian reverence. However, Phelps did understand that Christ himself was the titular character and did not permit himself to become distracted by the theological problem of the correct response to the presence of evil. The nature of the challenge to dogma was in quite a different direction, as will be discussed shortly. First, however, there are two more commentaries to be mentioned.

The reading that comes closest to being satisfactory, one that neatly balances the text and the subtext, is that of Robert Graves. In his essay, he calls this poem what it is: “an apocryphal account of the Crucifixion” the implications of which are, if not blasphemous, certainly daring. Housman sufficiently disguised the identification of the character with Christ himself to produce “the intended irony of the poem which is strewn with the plainest scriptural allusions.” He did this by means of two linguistic devices, calling the Cross a “gallows-tree” and calling the Disciples “lads” rather than ‘brethren’ or ‘children’.²⁶ Here, however, Housman has Christ entreat that his example *not* be followed, which Le Mire calls the crowning irony of the poem.²⁷ This is perhaps the best example of Housman’s typical practice of turning Biblical motifs on their heads.

Now let us return to the problem of just how this poem does, in fact, challenge Christian dogma, for even Graves, perceptive as he was, missed what I see as the main point of the poem. There are only two ways of regarding Christ. Either he was the son of the Joseph of Nazareth, the carpenter who created objects out of wood, or he was the Son of God, the Carpenter who created the world out of His own thought. Ultimately, the

²⁴ Tom Burns Haber (1941). The spirit of the perverse in A. E. H. *The South Atlantic Quarterly* XL, 368-78.

²⁵ William Lyon Phelps (1918). *The advance of English poetry in the 20th century*, pp. 68-69. New York: Dodd, Mead.

²⁶ Robert Graves (1922). “The Carpenter’s Son.” In: *On English Poetry*, pp. 31-33. London, Heinemann.

²⁷ Eugene D. Le Mire (1965). The irony and ethics of *A Shropshire Lad*, pp. 109-127. *University of Windsor Review* I, Spring.

question in this poem is a matter of capitalization. Is it about the carpenter's son or the Carpenter's Son?

If he is the Son of God, then tampering with evil is indeed "sticking to his Father's trade." And yet the poem is most specific. He should have stuck with "plane and adze," that is, with carpentry, which was his father's trade. And so he is the merely mortal Joshua Bar Joseph. The lines only make sense if the character is what the title indicates: the (mortal) carpenter's son. And herein lies the challenge to Christian dogma, indeed to the very foundations of Christianity. Those critics who have been so scathing about the poem, presumably sensed this on some level but were incapable of admitting it and so rationalized their horror by searching desperately for some other reason for their reaction. The entire poem is predicated on the replacement of the divine Jesus by the human Joshua, and the text, in the condemned man's own words, affirms his merely human status. This is the very carefully camouflaged subtext. Christ is not the Carpenter's Son but only the carpenter's son.

Here, from the Christian point of view at least, is the ultimate challenge, the ultimate "affront to orthodoxy," the ultimate deviation "not only from conventional religious belief but from conventional reverence." And it is so heavily masked that, although it makes the Christian reader distinctly uneasy, to say the least, its essence, being unthinkable, is unrecognizable. The same challenge – and the same conclusion – are voiced in another poem, the last one to be considered, "Easter Hymn" (MP 1). Unlike the preceding poem, but like most of those with a Scriptural basis, it awaited publication until after the death of the author. The same two possibilities and the implications of each one are considered in a balanced structure, one possibility in each of the two verses. Each verse begins with "if," and the hinge is the first word of the second verse: "But" (If you were merely human, then . . . , but if You were the Messiah, then . . .). Each verse considers the implications of its own governing 'if'.

The positive first verse, in which Christ is simply a dead person, no more than the "son of man" who will "Sleep well and see no morning," is set against the negative second verse in which Christ is seated "at the right hand of majesty on high." The poem is thus, in Haber's words, "poised midway between acceptance and rejection of the Resurrection."²⁸ This being one of Housman's poems, the result is all but inevitable. A poem at first "poised midway" between two alternatives has, by the time it ends, made up its mind. The conclusion – inevitably – is the same as that implied in "The Carpenter's Son."

Labeling the first verse 'positive' and the second 'negative' demands explanation on my part. The first verse, that in which Christ is merely

²⁸ Tom Burns Haber, *A. E. Housman*, p. 120.

human, briefly outlines the result of his teachings as “The hate you died to quench and could but fan” ascending “in smoke and fire by day and night.” This evokes two images. The first is that of religious persecution, everything from burning ‘heretics’ at the stake up to the Holocaust. The second image is that of the pillars of smoke and fire through which God manifested himself during the Exodus from Egypt. The combination of these images means that religious persecution becomes the proof of God’s presence and active involvement in human affairs! But according to the poem, “you died to quench” this “hate” which manifests itself as religious persecution. With what religious persecution was Jesus’ life and death associated? The entire context is the persecution of the Jews by the pagan Romans and the resulting rumblings of revolt in Judea against Rome’s attempts to impose its pantheism on Judea’s unwilling subjects. This revolt burst out in literal flames less than a century after the Crucifixion when Rabbi Akiva and his general, Bar Kochba, led a rebellion against Rome, a rebellion that eventuated in the burning of Jerusalem in 72 C.E. The subtextual implication is that Jesus was attempting to “quench” the flame of revolt against Rome, which creates its own pretty kettle of both religious and historical fish. In this verse, then, Christ is considered an idealistic, well-meaning, and singularly ineffective human being. Why then do I call this verse ‘positive’? Because it ends with the poet’s bestowing on Christ the greatest benison in his vocabulary – endless and dreamless sleep, Housman’s usual paradigm of death. “Sleep well and see no morning, son of man.”

In this verse, “if” Jesus is merely a man, not only is his own resurrection denied, so is his promise of eternal life in Heaven to all who believe in him. More, his death is ascribed to his very efforts to substitute love for hate. These attempts not only eventuated in his own death but also in an accretion of hate. He succeeds only in increasing the intensity of the flames he sought to douse. This being the case, dreamless sleep in which he will remain blissfully unaware of the results of his life’s work would be the greatest of blessings.

The “if” of the second verse is that Christ was actually the Messiah. But there is an additional – understood – “if” that is vitally important. If he is the Messiah now re-united with God in Heaven – and *if* he has not forgotten the events of his life on earth, the persecution he underwent and how his life on earth ended (“Your tears, your agony and bloody sweat, / Your cross and passion”) – then the time has certainly arrived when he should return to earth (“Bow hither out of heaven”), take a good look at the results of his teachings (“and see”), and undo the harm he has done (“and save”). There is no response. The rest is silence. Either He was not the Messiah after all, or he is suffering from amnesia. In either case, there is no salvation and the world continues to run “ruinward” (MP 43). The balance

of the evidence of human history inexorably tilts in favor of the premise of the first verse.

I called this 'negative' because if he is indeed the son of God, he must be indicted for forgetting his own experiences, neglecting his responsibilities, and breaking his promises. He is in the dock for malfeasance in office, and the poet pens the indictment, but ends it with a final plea for divine intervention. There is no response to that plea. The kindest possible conclusion is that he is only the carpenter's son sleeping eternally in his grave, and not the Carpenter's Son, sitting neglectfully by God's side in heaven and doing nothing.

As a human being condemned by human justice and executed as a felon, Christ can engage Housman's sympathy and the poet can wish him well ("Sleep well and see no morning"), as he wished other condemned men well in other poems. But as the Messiah, Housman places him in the dock.

Certain conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing examination. It seems clear that Housman identified himself with victims, whether they were condemned by Divine or human justice, and indeed he saw little difference between the two varieties, for neither was just. His sympathies were engaged on the side of the accused. It is further evident that Housman's vaunted atheism was religious faith betrayed, repudiated, and still desired. It is impossible not to feel at the end of "Easter Hymn" that he is waiting with bated breath, hoping against hope to be answered, hoping he was wrong, hoping there was a god who would hear and answer his appeal, hoping indeed for "the tokens that to Israel came." Finally it is evident that the techniques that Housman used in dealing with individual references, phrases, and allusions were applied also to complete narratives, although the subtext was more carefully obscured. The paradoxical result (in which I suspect Housman would have found both relish and grim amusement) is that his handling of individual tags from the Bible has been recognized from the very beginning and has lent itself to considerable critical analysis. His treatment of complete narratives, however, has been accepted at face value, misinterpreted, twisted, ignored, or greeted with howls of outrage, but seldom examined critically.

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