

CHRISTIAN LORE AND CHARACTERS' NAMES  
IN A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

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The stereotype of the science fiction writer as greatly inferior to his literary brethren is invalidated by Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959), a profound and well-written novel which has become a science fiction classic. Miller employs a wide range of sophisticated literary techniques--including his method of naming characters--to express his theme, which, simply stated, is that although man has advanced technologically over the years, he has failed to progress spiritually; without Christian values to check and direct his materialistic impulses, man becomes enslaved by his technology which eventually destroys him. In order to emphasize this spiritual theme and at the same time delineate the functions of his characters, Miller has carefully drawn the names of several of his most important figures from Christian lore.

The first direct thematic statement is made early in Part II of the novel, which is set in the new Renaissance year of 3174, almost twelve hundred years after a nuclear holocaust destroyed civilization and plunged man into a second Dark Ages from which he is just now emerging. In a conversation between Dom Apollo, a Catholic priest, and Thon Taddeo, the leading new Renaissance scientist, the latter reflects on the nuclear devastation of the past and asks,

"How can a great and wise civilization have destroyed itself so completely?" Apollo replies, "By being materially great and materially wise, and nothing else."<sup>1</sup> Apollo goes on to suggest that a study of history can help teach man the spiritual values necessary for his survival in a technologically-developing world and ideally can keep him from repeating the mistakes that once before led to civilization's destruction and can lead to it again. Apollo's warning about the terrible consequences that must attend man's failure to temper his material impulses with spiritual values is truly prophetic, as the novel's conclusion shows. Because man fails to learn from his history and instead repeats his old errors, the novel ends with the world once more engulfed in nuclear war and threatened with destruction. In order to lend prophetic force to the priest's warning, Miller named him after Apollo, the classical god of prophecy.

The name Apollo, however, also brings to mind the biblical Appollos, a preacher of the gospel contemporary with St. Paul and the putative author of the "Epistle to the Hebrews."<sup>2</sup> The argument of the "Epistle" is firmly rooted in historical Judaism (Dartmouth, p. 1131a); likewise, the position that Apollo takes in opposition to Taddeo emphasizes the importance of history and tradition in teaching spiritual values. Moreover, just as the biblical Appollos preached a religious doctrine in opposition to his age's growing materialism, so, too, does Apollo offer to Taddeo, the scientific

materialist, a spiritual alternative to the materialist viewpoint. That alternative, however, is rejected because Taddeo, as so many others before him, has failed to learn the spiritual lessons that history teaches. The evocation of a biblical name for the character who articulates this theme allows Miller to lend the spiritual force of the Bible to Dom Apollo's prophetic words.

The theme articulated by Apollo is further dramatized in Part II of Canticle by the abbot of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, Dom Paulo, whose name is designed to associate him with St. Paul. A number of provocative parallels between the two support this supposition. For example, St. Paul was a contemporary and friend of Appollos, just as Paulo and Apollo are contemporaries and friends in Canticle. In addition, St. Paul was a Jewish tentmaker of the tribe of Benjamin, and Paulo's confidante in Canticle is the Jewish tentmaker, Benjamin. Another parallel between the two is that St. Paul suffered from his "thorn in the flesh," an unknown chronic ailment (Dartmouth, p. 993), while Dom Paulo suffers from frequent internal hemorrhaging. Finally, both go through periods of religious confusion and doubt. St. Paul was an avid opponent of Christianity until his conversion on the road to Damascus, and Dom Paulo questions his faith until Benjamin helps him overcome his uncertainty (Ch. 14; pp. 135-38).

More important than these somewhat superficial parallels, however, are the similar roles that St. Paul and Dom Paulo play

in the Church. St. Paul is often regarded as "the second founder of Christianity" (Dartmouth, p. 991), and Dom Paulo's mission, as he sees it, is to help re-establish the basic tenets of Christianity which had eroded after the nuclear holocaust and which are still imperiled by religious schisms and rapid scientific advancement. When Taddeo visits Paulo's abbey to study the electric generator that one of the monks has re-invented, the abbot challenges Taddeo's view that the Church is an anomaly in a scientific age and that it impedes technological progress. Paulo asks him, "Why do you wish to discredit the past. . . ? So that you need not learn from their [sic] mistakes?" (Ch. 22; p. 217.) These questions and the abbot's earlier attempt to convince Taddeo that all people are descendants of Adam and are related to "historical humanity" (Ch. 22; p. 214) echo Apollo's words to Taddeo and link the abbot and the priest in their struggle to reassert Christian ideals in an antireligious and materialistic era, just as the biblical Appollos and St. Paul were linked in their efforts to sustain Christianity. By naming his chief spokesmen after biblical figures, Miller imparts the spiritual force of spiritual associations to their views.

Still another character who has significant biblical associations is Benjamin, an enigmatic figure who appears in all three major sections of the book. In Part II of Canticle, Benjamin identifies himself as Lazarus when he says that the person for whom he has conducted a centuries-long search once shouted "Come forth!"

at him (Ch. 16; p. 163). These, of course, are the words uttered by Christ when he raised Lazarus from the tomb (John 1:11). Also, in Part III, Benjamin tells the abbot, "Call me Lazarus" (Ch. 25; p. 256). There are two biblical figures named Lazarus, and Miller's character is identified with both of them. Lazarus is the beggar in the parable of the rich man and the beggar (Luke 16:20), and Benjamin is portrayed as a beggar in Parts I and III of the novel and twice is seen eating at the beggars' table in the abbey. His depiction as a beggar emphasizes his role as a wanderer constantly searching for the Messiah, a point to which I shall return later.

The significance of the association of Benjamin with the Lazarus that Jesus raised from the tomb is that the latter figure had two sisters, Martha and Mary, to whom Abbot Zerchi refers in Part III of the novel when, reflecting on the Church's use of a starship to send a group of monks and children to Alpha Centauri instead of using it for colonists who desperately need a place to settle, he thinks, "The conflict of Martha and Mary always recurred" (Ch. 27, p. 279). Zerchi is referring here to the biblical story in which Jesus goes to dine at Martha's home. While Mary sits at Jesus' feet to hear him speak, Martha concerns herself with the details of serving the meal. Jesus gently rebukes her for this, not because her actions are wrong, but because they demonstrate incorrect priorities (Luke 10:38).

This story is analogous to Miller's attitude toward the

material/spiritual conflict in Canticle. He rebukes man in the novel not because his development of science and technology is wrong, but because his priorities get out of order when he allows these material concerns to take precedence over his spiritual values. According to Miller, the latter must prevail if man is to break the chains that bind him to the "mad clockwork" of his enslaving technology (Ch. 25; p. 245). By associating Benjamin with Lazarus and having Zerchi directly refer to Martha and Mary, Miller enriches his theme by reinforcing it with biblical allusion.

In addition to his identification with the name of Lazarus, Benjamin's own name has associations important to the development of Canticle. As noted above, his name links his friend, Dom Paulo, with St. Paul, a member of the tribe of Benjamin, but the name also has wider ramifications. In Part II of the book, Benjamin is an outcast whose solitary existence high in the rocky, barren mountains of Utah may constitute an oblique reference to Judges 19-21, which relates the story of how various tribes united against the tribe of Benjamin, destroying all but six hundred who fled to the wilderness of Rock Rimmon. Benjamin's role as a solitary outcast in the novel --at one point he is called "the last old Hebrew" (Ch. 16; p. 159)-- is broadened into thematic significance when he is identified with the Wandering Jew.

The tale of the Wandering Jew, although not biblical, is an important part of traditional Christian lore. The most popular

version of the story is that on the way to Calvary, Christ asked a bystander for a drink and was refused; as punishment for his refusal, the bystander was condemned to wander the earth until the Second Coming of Christ. That Miller's Benjamin is to be identified with this figure becomes evident in Part II of Canticle when he says that in addition to being a tentmaker, he has another career, that of "wanderer" (Ch. 16; p. 154). He goes on to say that he is 3200 years old--which, according to Miller's time scheme in the novel, makes him a contemporary of Jesus--and that he "did penance for Israel and waited for a Messiah. . ." (Ch. 16; p. 163).

Throughout the first two sections of the novel and into the third and last section, Benjamin awaits his Messiah's return. His long wait serves to advance the theme in Part II after Thon Taddeo arrives at the abbey and makes an impassioned speech to the monks, saying to them, "Tomorrow, a new prince shall rule. Men of understanding, men of science, shall stand behind his throne and the universe will come to know his might. His name is Truth" (Ch.20; p. 197). Note that Taddeo significantly omits "and" between "men of understanding" and "men of science," thereby equating the two and suggesting that the only way to truth is through science. Benjamin, however, rejects this thesis when, after Taddeo's speech, the old wanderer approaches the scientist to see if Taddeo is the one for whom he waits; he peers deeply into Taddeo's eyes, but "dejectedly" turns away, saying, "It's still not Him" (Ch. 20;

p.200). Thon Taddeo's view that science alone is the means to truth was rejected earlier by Apollo and Paulo, and now also is rejected by Benjamin, who sees that the man of science is not the promised Messiah. Man's hope, Miller again indicates, does not reside in science, and Benjamin must continue to wait for the spiritual leader who will end his search and provide hope for all mankind.

That search does end in Part III of the novel, which is set in the year 3800, when the strange figure of Rachel appears. "Rachel" is the name that Mrs. Grales, a fanatically religious old woman who sells tomatoes to the abbey, gives to the second head that grows out of her shoulder. The Rachel head, with its lovely, infantile features, seems perfectly normal except that it gives no evidence of sharing in Mrs. Grales' breathing or understanding. To the monks, it is a grim reminder of the genetic aftermath of the nuclear war eighteen hundred years earlier and a warning to man of the dangers inherent in a technology unchecked and undirected by spiritual values. To Benjamin, however, Rachel's appearance seems to signify the end of his centuries-long search for his Messiah, for upon her introduction to the book, Benjamin mysteriously disappears from the narrative. That there is a spiritual bond between Benjamin and Rachel is strongly suggested by the fact that in the Old Testament, Benjamin is Rachel's son. Miller transmutes the blood bond between the two into a spiritual bond, and implies that

the Wandering Jew has found his Messiah at last and need wander no longer.

Rachel's role as Messiah or Christ returned to earth becomes more and more evident as Part III of the novel progresses. Her spiritual purity is emphasized by her physical association with Mrs. Grales, whose name surely is intended to bring to mind the legend of the Holy Grail. The Grail, the cup or platter used by Christ at the Last Supper, has long been a symbol of Christian purity because of its association with Jesus and because, according to the legend, only the spiritually pure could view it. In Malory's Morte D'Arthur, for example, Lancelot, because of his illicit relationship with Guinevere, is denied sight of the Grail; other knights, depending on their degree of spirituality, are given brief glimpses of its supernatural light; but only Galahad, who is totally pure, is able to see and touch it. Mrs. Grales' name, then, fittingly evokes this legend in order to emphasize Rachel's spiritual purity.

Further emphasis is given Rachel's spirituality by the dream Brother Joshua, one of the Albertian monks, has after the unsettling experience of seeing the slumbering Rachel head smile at him and apparently attempt to speak to him. In the dream, a surgeon begins to cut the Rachel head from Mrs. Grales' shoulder, and Rachel opens her eyes and addresses Joshua:

"Accurate am I the exception," she seemed to be saying. "I commensurate the deception. Am."

He could make nothing of it, but he tried to reach through and save her. There seemed to be a rubbery wall of glass in the way. He paused and tried to read her lips. I am the, I am the--

"I am the Immaculate Conception," came the dream whisper. (Ch. 25; p. 257.)

These words spur Joshua to greater efforts to save her, but the surgeon succeeds in severing "this deformity" from Mrs. Grales' shoulder. This scene dramatizes the spiritual/material conflict in the novel in terms of religion and science; the man of faith (Joshua) struggles to save spirituality or faith (Rachel) from destruction by science (the surgeon). The scene also is important when it identifies Rachel with the Immaculate Conception and hence with the spiritual and physical purity--already suggested by Mrs. Grales' name--associated with the Virgin Mary, much as later Rachel is to be identified with two other perfectly untainted biblical figures, Christ and Eve before the Fall.

Shortly after Joshua's dream, the world erupts in war. When the nuclear attack that destroys the abbey begins, the abbot, Dom Zerchi, is hearing Mrs. Grales' confession. He notices that her voice becomes blurred and then sounds youthful. An explosion knocks him unconscious, and when he revives, he sees Mrs. Grales

approaching him; when she draws near, Dom Zerchi realizes that her body has been rejuvenated, although her head seems to be withering, ready to fall away "like a scab or an umbilical cord" (Ch. 29; p. 310), and it is the Rachel head which is sentient. The dying priest sees that she who was Mrs. Grales and who is now Rachel has been wounded and from her now-youthful arm, he plucks five slivers of glass--a reminder of the five wounds of Christ--and he is amazed to note that she does not bleed. Next, Zerchi attempts to administer conditional baptism to this "newly born" creature, but she recoils from him, seizes the ciborium from his hand, traces a cross on his forehead, and says, "Live." The priest's final thought as he dies is that he "sees primal innocence in those eyes and a promise of resurrection" (Ch. 29; p. 312).

We have in this scene a kind of Virgin Birth, emphasized by the mention of the "umbilical cord." Like Christ, Rachel is born of a pure vessel, symbolized by Mrs. Grales' name; moreover, she is born through supernatural agency and not by the seed of man. Her five wounds, her rejection of conditional baptism (which, as a perfectly pure being, she does not need), and her intuitive knowledge of the sacraments which she administers to the dying priest combine to create a Christ-figure. Associations with the Holy Grail, the "primal" Eve, the Virgin, and Christ make Rachel a figure of absolute spiritual purity. But why would Miller choose

to name this character after a woman whose Old Testament story (Genesis 39:15-30) is hardly a tale of spirituality?

One reason, noted above, is to suggest her spiritual relationship with Benjamin and, by so doing, to identify her with the Messiah for whom he waits. Another reason may be that Miller, who constantly stresses the difficulty of the Church's task in trying to harness and direct mankind's materialism, had in mind that part of the biblical Rachel's story which tells of the fourteen difficult years Jacob spent laboring for Laban, Rachel's father, in order to win her hand. When Jacob and Rachel left Laban's home, Rachel stole Laban's teraphim, or household gods. Miller may have found in this story a metaphor for his theme. Jacob's long labor for Rachel may suggest the difficulty involved in man's struggle to obtain the spirituality represented in the novel by Rachel, as well as suggesting the possibility of attaining that end with dedication and hard work. In addition, just as the biblical Rachel removed from her father's home the teraphim, always condemned in the Old Testament as symbols of materialism, so does Miller's Rachel attempt to "remove" man's materialism by offering him a spiritual hope. That hope, of course, is Rachel herself in the promised Second Coming, another gift from God to show man the path to salvation.

Less conjectural are the reasons behind Miller's naming of Joshua, whose role at the conclusion of the novel is as impor-

tant as that of Rachel. Joshua's name is Hebrew for "Yahweh is salvation" and appears in the Apocrypha and the New Testament in a Hellenized form as "Jesus" (Dartmouth, p. 115b). The latter association identifies Joshua as a spiritual leader, but his name also links him with another kind of leader, the Old Testament Joshua who was a famous warrior appointed successor to Moses and who led his people to the Promised Land (Numbers 28:18f; Joshua 15:13-15).

The parallels between this biblical character and Miller's figure are striking. In Canticle, Joshua is a scientist-turned priest, and thus embodies Miller's view that one must turn from the material to the spiritual. Because Joshua has chosen to do precisely this, he is the first to be given--through the dream in which Rachel identifies herself to him as the Immaculate Conception --a glimpse of Rachel's spiritual purity. Abbot Zerchi, recognizing Joshua's spiritual commitment, selects him to guide a starship of settlers, mostly children, to Alpha Centauri, there to establish a colony in case the nuclear war that is about to begin destroys life on earth. Joshua, who has fought a personal battle with materialism and won it--just as his biblical predecessor at the Battle of Ai won a great victory over the materialistic (Joshua 8:2-29)--will attempt to establish a new society, one based on spiritual values. Although his success is not assured--the starship he guides is said to be only "an act of hope" and therefore a Christian act---

the suggestion is strong that he will succeed, for the Lord said to Joshua in the Bible, "the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest" (Joshua 1:9). In addition, Joshua's family called him Joshea, which best translates as "salvation." Therefore, Miller has indicated through his naming of this character that the Lord will help Joshua save the children and attain his goal of a spiritually-oriented society in the "Promised Land" of Alpha Centauri.

At every important stage of Canticle, then, Miller uses names from the Bible and Christian lore in order to define his characters' roles and to advance his theme. Dom Apollo, appropriately named after both the classical god of prophecy and the biblical preacher, first articulates Miller's thesis. Dom Paulo, like St. Paul, attempts to re-establish the tenets of Christianity, warning against the dangers of the materialistic philosophy fostered by science. By rejecting science and finding the Messiah for whom he searches, Benjamin, the old wanderer, makes concrete Paulo's theoretical position and suggests Rachel's spiritual nature. That nature is emphasized by the means of Rachel's birth and the association of Mrs. Grales' name with the Holy Grail. Rachel, because of her identification with the Virgin and Christ and because her name alludes to the Old Testament Rachel, embodies the spiritual doctrine that man must embrace to survive. Joshua takes Rachel's message to heart and, like his biblical namesake, leads

his people to the Promised Land. Thus, Miller's richly allusive style has enabled him to advance a deeply Christian theme and to add to it the weight of scriptural authority.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Walter M. Miller, Jr., A Canticle for Leibowitz (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), Ch. 12; p. 119. All further references to the novel are made parenthetically within the text. For the convenience of readers who are using one of the three other recent editions of the novel, I have included chapter numbers (common to all editions) as well as page numbers from my edition.

<sup>2</sup> Roy B. Chamberlain and Herman Feldman, editors and commentators, The Dartmouth Bible (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1950), p. 1038a. All further references to this work will be made parenthetically within the text.

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