



FRAGMENTS OF FAITH: BIBLICAL SYMBOLISM AND THEMATIC PRESENCE IN T.S. ELIOT'S AND W.B YEATS SELECTED POEMS

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Abstract

This paper explores the functions of biblical scripture as a mirror of spiritual decay and dwindling hope for redemption in modernist poetry, focusing on the works of T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. Through a close examination of Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (1925) and "The Waste Land" (1922), the study highlights how Eliot draws on subtle biblical allusions—especially imagery from Ezekiel, Revelation, Psalms, and the Gospels—against the backdrop of post-World War I disillusionment. His poetry sketches a world marked by moral collapse, theological silence, and cultural fragmentation. Symbols such as water, eyes, and apocalyptic themes, along with re-contextualized elements like the Lord's Prayer and nursery rhymes, reflect the persistence of religious forms in a secular age. Eliot's integration of Christian and Eastern philosophy reveals a deep yearning for transcendence amid spiritual hollowness. The paper further examines the thematic and symbolic presence of biblical elements in three key poems by W.B. Yeats: "The Second Coming" (1920), "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), and "Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1933). Yeats employs biblical imagery not to assert Christian orthodoxy, but to critique the spiritual and cultural crises of his time and to express his evolving metaphysical vision. Through apocalyptic symbols, references to judgment, and soul-centered imagery, Yeats reshapes sacred motifs to reflect personal, historical, and philosophical transformation. Together, the works of Eliot and Yeats demonstrate how biblical allusions serve as powerful literary tools to interrogate spiritual desolation, fragmented faith, and the search for transcendence in the modern age.

Keywords: Biblical Allusions, Spiritual Desolation, Moral Decay, Fragmented Faith, Apocalypse, Transcendence.

One of the most important figures in modernist literature, T.S. Eliot, exhibits a nuanced relationship with Christianity and biblical tradition in all his poetry. His early and mid-century works, especially "The Hollow Men" (1925) and "The Waste Land" (1922), invoke religious and scriptural language while expressing a deep spiritual desolation in post-war modernity. By examining the Bible's symbolic and thematic presence in these two poems, this essay makes the case that Eliot employs the Bible as both a fading hope for redemption and a reflection of societal decay. Similarly, in an age marked by war, cultural upheaval, and spiritual doubt, W.B. Yeats turned to the Bible—not just for comfort, but for symbolism. Yeats's poetry is steeped in myth,

mysticism, and the sacred, but unlike traditional Christian poets, he often reinterpreted biblical images through a personal, esoteric lens. In “The Second Coming” (1920), “Sailing to Byzantium” (1927), and “Dialogue of Self and Soul” (1933), Yeats uses Christian symbols and themes not to reinforce orthodox faith, but to articulate a spiritual dislocation and a yearning for transcendent order. This paper argues that Yeats employs biblical imagery to critique the disintegration of spiritual values in the modern world while simultaneously constructing a new spiritual framework rooted in eternity, artistic immortality, and personal revelation.

“The Waste Land”, by Eliot, is set against a background of spiritual turmoil. The poem, written shortly after World War I, depicts a contemporary society rife with moral corruption, spiritual emptiness, and cultural fatigue. Many biblical parallels, particularly in the imagery taken from the books of Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes, demonstrate this feeling of emptiness. In a manner reminiscent of Ezekiel chapters 17 and 37, which are full of allusions to ruin and possible rebirth, the poem asks, “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish?” (lines 19–20). In like manner, Eliot views the “valley of dry bones” in Ezekiel 37 as a key symbolic framework for his perception of contemporary society as spiritually dead and in need of a heavenly resurrection that never comes.

Water is used symbolically throughout “The Waste Land”, reinforcing Eliot's biblical ties. In Christian literature, water is frequently depicted as a cleansing and life-giving element, as seen most clearly in the ceremonies of baptism and in Jesus's gift of “living water” to the Samaritan woman (John 4:10). However, in Eliot's poem, water is either absent or a menace. The longing in “If there were water / And no rock” (lines 331-332) reflects the thirsting soul of Psalm 63 by bringing to mind both physical and spiritual drought. In contrast to the psalmist who turns to God, Eliot's speaker is still in a state of ambiguity, unable to connect with the divine.

The silence or absence of God is a major theological issue in “The Waste Land”. In contrast to the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah, who heard heavenly voices, Eliot's modern speakers only hear bits, echoes, or nothing at all. The poem's main observer is now Tiresias, a blind prophet from Greek mythology, who has taken the place of the biblical prophet and thereby emphasized the decline in spiritual authority. The secularization of the prophetic function is indicated by this change, which implies that the contemporary world no longer hears or follows divine guidance. “The Waste Land” ends by combining biblical rhythms with Eastern philosophical concepts, particularly those taken from the Upanishads. Following the saying “Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.” is the chorus “Shantih shantih shantih” (line 433), which mirrors the peace that is frequently sought in biblical blessings like Numbers 6:24-26. Eliot implies a syncretic desire for transcendence by combining traditions, one that transcends the limitations of any one holy book. Nevertheless, in a world that has lost its theological coherence, the cultural legacy of Christianity is still visible in the fragmented usage of the Lord's Prayer—“For Thine is the Kingdom.”

A few years after that, “The Hollow Men” focuses on the modern soul's inner condition. While “The Hollow Men” investigates psychological paralysis, cultural destruction is shown in “The Waste Land”. The characters of the poem are referred to as “stuffed men,” therefore bringing up images of dead straw men or puppets. Their hollowness brings Revelation 3:16 to mind, where God rejects the lukewarm, those who are neither hot nor cold. This center point between good and bad becomes somewhat of existential suffering.

Looking at Yeats's “The Second Coming”, it is the most explicitly biblical of the three poems, drawing directly from texts like Matthew 24 and the Book of Revelation. The poem begins with a world in chaos: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.” Yeats evokes the biblical concept of the apocalypse, here,—a time of tribulation that heralds divine judgment. However, Yeats's version is bleak and ambiguous. The expected Christian redeemer is replaced by a mysterious, inhuman figure: “A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun.”

This terrifying beast, reminiscent of the beasts in Revelation 13, subverts expectations of Christ's return. Instead of salvation, it suggests degeneration or a new, alien order. The line “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?” powerfully evokes the Nativity—but grotesquely inverted. Bethlehem, traditionally associated with Christ's birth, becomes the birthplace of something monstrous. By reshaping the biblical narrative of “The Second Coming” into an image of dread, Yeats reflects his disillusionment with modernity and the collapse of spiritual coherence. He does not reject biblical prophecy entirely but recasts it as a symbol of inevitable but disturbing transformation further strengthening the view of the apocalyptic times.

The often reiterated line "For Thine is the Kingdom," which then stops, is another reference to the Lord's Prayer. The incompleteness of this line underlines the emptiness of the hollow men's prayers and their incapacity to connect with God. This shows Eliot's central argument: even in a world without spirituality, religious practice still flourishes in the outside world, though its significance has faded. Though the content is deleted, the biblical structure stays. Through the frequent usage of eye imagery in "The Hollow Men", biblical symbolism also affects the poem. As in Revelation 1:14 or Psalm 11:4, where eyes are seen as representations of truth and omniscience, the hollow guys "dare not meet the eyes," which may allude to a heavenly or judgmental presence. For those who have lost their spiritual nature, the eyes—which mirror the divine gaze—are unbearable. Their avoidance of this glance reveals their alienation from God. Another amazing biblical reference is the poem's portrayal of a failed apocalypse. Eliot offers a subdued reverse of Revelation's vivid eschatological imagery in which the trumpets of angels and the return of Christ announce the end: "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper" (lines 97-98). This anticlimactic attitude toward the conclusion runs contrary to biblical predictions of ultimate judgment and redemption. The Hollow Men's cosmos just vanishes into nothing; it is not judged or redeemed.

While "The Second Coming" focuses on the historical crisis, "Sailing to Byzantium" turns inward to the individual's search for immortality. Yeats again draws on biblical concepts—especially the dichotomy between flesh and spirit, found in Ecclesiastes and Pauline epistles. The speaker rejects the physical and sensual world of youth and proclaims: "An aged man is but a paltry thing, / A tattered coat upon a stick." The desire to escape the decay of the body and enter an eternal state echoes Christian ideas of resurrection and the soul's journey. Yet Yeats diverges from Christian eschatology. Instead of aspiring to heaven, the speaker longs to be "gathered into the artifice of eternity," becoming an eternal work of art in the city of Byzantium—an emblem of timeless, sacred beauty. The biblical undertone emerges in the speaker's prayer: "O sages standing in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall." These sages recall the saints or prophets purified by divine fire (cf. Malachi 3:2). Yet they are also artisans, suggesting that salvation lies not in faith but in artistic and spiritual transcendence. Yeats replaces biblical heaven with a mystical vision of aesthetic immortality.

Like the parody of "Here we go round the mulberry bush" becoming "Here we go round the prickly pear," folk rituals and nursery rhymes further misrepresent the sacredness of custom. Genesis and Revelation's emblem of the "prickly pear" could represent a degraded or inanimate manifestation of the Tree of Life. Eliot's juxtaposition of childish sing-song with spiritual ideas exposes the loss of innocence and the trivialization of religious symbols in the contemporary consciousness.

Look at "The Waste Land" and "The Hollow Men" together as a whole to carefully analyze the decline of spiritual significance in contemporary life. Not just based on aesthetic or intertextual concerns, Eliot's poetic worldview draws from biblical themes and symbols. The Bible has both the language of misery and a distant hope's echo. Although Eliot's characters sometimes seem estranged from God, their speech still contains scripture, implying that the remembrance of religion lingers even in unbelief. Furthermore mirroring the fractured character of contemporary spirituality, Eliot's poetic fragmenting—which layers biblical references, mythology, and modern language— This approach captures the postmodern paradox: still unable to completely give up religion yet unable to eliminate its vestiges. Eliot's work becomes therefore a contemporary scripture bemoaning God's absence and longing for its return. In this way, Eliot's work turns into a modern scripture that laments the absence of God and yearns for its return.

In "Dialogue of Self and Soul", Yeats stages a philosophical debate between the mortal self and the immortal soul, drawing on both biblical and Eastern spiritual traditions. The Soul, echoing the biblical voice of wisdom literature, urges transcendence: "I am the self that aches with age / And finds no comfort but in things / That do not change." This longing for eternity reflects themes from Psalms and Ecclesiastes, which speak of the vanity of the world and the promise of eternal truth. However, the Self resists, choosing the cycle of life over the escape into timelessness: "I am content to live it all again / And yet again." This defiance of the Soul's asceticism can be read as a rejection of traditional Christian values that condemn the body and desire. Yeats's spiritual vision embraces both suffering and rebirth—more aligned with a holistic, perhaps even pagan, approach to the sacred. The dialogue dramatizes a tension central to Yeats's poetry: the conflict between spiritual aspiration and earthly experience. Though biblical in tone and structure, the poem ultimately unsettles the Christian dualism of body and soul.

To sum up, the Bible is portrayed by T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” and “The Hollow Men” as a shattered mirror reflecting lost meaning rather than as a firm theological basis. Biblical allusions emphasize both the underlying capacity for regeneration and the moral decay of the 20th century. Eliot does not offer theological assurance or easy answers; instead, he paints poetic images in which scripture reverberates throughout the broken pieces of faith. Yeats’s use of biblical symbolism is also neither conventional nor reverent. Instead, he appropriates and transforms it to express a complex vision of spiritual crisis, transformation, and renewal. In “The Second Coming”, the Bible’s apocalyptic imagery becomes a metaphor for historical collapse. In “Sailing to Byzantium”, biblical ideas of the soul are redirected toward aesthetic immortality. And in “Dialogue of Self and Soul”, the Bible’s moral dichotomies are challenged by a vision that affirms earthly life.

By reworking the Bible’s themes and symbols, Yeats and Eliot bridge the sacred and the personal, the historical and the eternal. Their poetry becomes a space where spiritual tradition is interrogated and reimagined—testifying not to the decline of faith, but to its metamorphosis in a changing world. Both poets thereby urges readers to confront their own spiritual condition, which is caught between despair and the unattainable promise of grace.

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