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and their relation to *The Rime of*
the Ancient Mariner

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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God save thee, Ancient Mariner! Stories of the *Book of Genesis* and their relation to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has some obvious Christian influences, from the angelic troop to the blessing of the water snakes. However, this paper proposes that Coleridge made the poem as a form of reversal of the stories found in the *Book of Genesis*, especially the stories of Cain and Noah's Ark. It suggests that the moral dimension of the poem, which is one of its most important features, is directly connected to Cain's murder of his brother and to Noah's dove as a bird of good omen. The harshness of the punishment is a point of tension in the poem, but this essay gives examples of God being just as punishing in the *Book of Genesis*, so the punishment of the Mariner is not without a predecessor. The story of the Fall is also transformed because Coleridge uses the image of a snake – or a water-snake – to return the Mariner to the world of prayer, while the snake in the *Book of Genesis* is responsible for tempting Eve and thus causing the Fall from Eden. Other elements that further connect the poem to the *Book of Genesis* are listed. A connection is also made between *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and another poem by Coleridge, "The Wanderings of Cain", which can be seen as sibling poems, both in how they came to be and in the predicament of their main characters.

KEYWORDS

***Book of Genesis*, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Christian symbolism, the Fall**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* has some apparent Christian symbolism – such as the hanging of the Albatross around the Mariner's neck instead of a cross, as well as the appearance of the Angelic troop. But there are other more covert elements of the work that are influenced by Coleridge's religious views. This essay will discuss the Biblical influence on the characters and events of the poem by analysing the stories found in the *Book of Genesis*. It will explain how Coleridge shaped the myth of the Fall to fit into his narrative, as well as discuss the similarities between the poem and the Genesis Flood Narrative.

Coleridge's early work was influenced by his religious beliefs, and Davidson argues that "he valued the Bible above all other books, but... he was no bibliolater" (413). At the same time, he believed that the Bible held a "superiority to all other books" (Davidson 417). Accordingly, the numerous Biblical elements in his writing come as no surprise, even if he was not a *bibliolater*. *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner's* concept lies in the story of Cain. Originally, Wordsworth and Coleridge set out to write the poem "The Wanderings of Cain", but the Prefatory Note to "The Wanderings of Cain" "describes how that curious prose fragment came into being and it ends by saying that the whole scheme for the collaboration with Wordsworth in a poem about Cain 'broke up in a laugh: and the Ancient Mariner was written instead'" (House 48). The very conception of the *Rime* comes from the Biblical story of Cain and the poem is riddled with different Christian undertones, but Fulmer argues that, even though Cain was the setting stone for the poem, the actual influence on Coleridge's creation lies in the myth of the Wandering Jew. This myth is not from the Bible itself but is still connected to Christianity. Woolf writes that the biblical antecedent of the Wandering Jew is Cain, but the legend itself is "only tenuously connected to biblical sources" (22). Woolf describes the character as being "... human but condemned to live forever until the Second Coming of Christ releases him" (21). Fulmer argues that, as the Jew "is obsessed with confessing the fatal event in his life, so is the Mariner compelled to relate the offense against God's creature which brought upon him the curse of restless wandering. Each hopes that a contrite spirit will obtain present relief for him and salvation at the Last Judgment" (Fulmer 804). And while Fulmer dismisses Cain as just an early influence on the poem, after which two separate poems were created, the story of the Fall and subsequent passages in Genesis may have had more influence on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* than Fulmer gives credit (Fulmer 803).

In short, the story of the Fall goes as follows – the bliss of Eden is ruined by the Serpent under whose influence Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit and are consequently banished from Eden. They have two children, Cain and Abel, and Cain kills Abel due to an immense feeling of jealousy and is punished and marked by God for his crime. Coleridge

symbolically reverses this story in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The Mariner's killing of the Albatross, argues Pen Warren, "symbolizes the Fall, and the Fall has two qualities important here: it is a condition of will, as Coleridge says, 'out of time,' and it is the result of no single human motive" (396). But House sees a problem in this line of thought, where he says that "at one point he (Warren) seems to equate the killing of the bird with the murder of a human being . . . and at another point to say that the killing 'symbolises' the Fall. . . [T]he killing cannot *equate* with both a murder and the Fall, which are very different kinds of things" (59). Warren, says House, observes the Fall as directly connected to Adam and Eve, without considering Cain's actions (59). But the story of Cain and Abel could be viewed as an extension of the Fall, since by killing his brother Cain became the first murderer, further distancing himself from Eden, and was consequently marked by God:

And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand;

And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him. (*King James Bible*, Gen. 4. 11, 15)

As Adam and Eve represent the Fall from Eden to the mortal world, Cain's story represents the descent of humanity through disregard of the higher, moral law. Not only is the mark that the Mariner receives analogous to Cain's, but the very killing of the Albatross can now be viewed as both a murder and a fall. The connection between the Mariner and the story of *Genesis* now gains a reversal of symbolism: it is not that the Mariner represents the fall of Adam and Eve, but the fall of Cain, after which the snake symbolism is also transformed. While in the Bible the snake brought the exodus from Eden, in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* it is in fact a return to the world of prayer, a salvation:

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The self-same moment I could pray;
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea (283-292).

While in *The Book of Genesis* the snake is instrumental in the fall of Adam and Eve, which then leads to the act of murder and the fall of Cain, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* reverses this pattern. If the Biblical pattern is bliss followed by the serpent and the sin, after which comes Cain's murder, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* follows the exact opposite order, showing the murder first, then sins of the sailors, after which the Mariner blesses the water snakes and is returned to the world of prayer. As House comments, "at that point the reminder of the sin against this principle is gone" (63) with the sinking of the Albatross. The focus now turns to the punishment, both the one that the Mariner receives, but also the punishment of his fellow sailors.

Whalley argues that "[t]here is the sternness and inexorability of Greek tragedy in the paradox that an act committed in ignorance of the laws governing albatrosses . . . *must* be punished in the most severe manner" (88). What he argues is that the punishment the Mariner receives is reminiscent of a Greek tragedy, while it actually resembles Biblical accounts very accurately (Whalley 88). The God of the Old Testament is not known for his lenient punishments. Fulmer quotes many characters who have, in one way or another, suffered the wrath of God, the Wandering Jew being the principal figure:

"An archetypal wanderer who suffers inordinately for a seemingly minor offense against God, man, and nature, the Mariner naturally bears varying degrees of likenesses to several others of the type: Cain, Jonah, Falkenberg, the Flying Dutchman, Christian the Mutineer, the mythical wandering Judas and Pilate, Huon, Peter Wilkins, the hero of John Newton's *The Authentic Narrative*, the Wild Huntsman, Philip Quarll, and many other sailors and wanderers" (799).

But even without analysing these characters, who stem from both the Bible and many other works, the story of the Fall itself shows how unforgiving God of the Old Testament could at times be,

Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.

And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life (*The Holy Bible, King James Version* Gen. 3. 16-17).

A severe punishment that followed the killing of the Albatross is in line

with God's actions in the Old Testament. The punishment might resemble Greek tragedy, but it is easily found in the Bible as well.

What precedes the blessing of the water snakes are days spent on the ship alone. "Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse/ And yet I could not die." (Coleridge 262-263) Number seven, especially the symbolism of seven days, is important in the Bible. Apart from the creation of the world in *Genesis 1*, there is also the story of Noah, and God said to him, "For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth." (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Gen. 7. 4) The Mariner, after the blessing of the snakes, falls asleep and upon waking up sees that it's raining. What follows in the Bible is the eradication of all life except those on the Ark. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, everyone on the ship is already dead and with the coming of the rain the dead rise again. So again, these are the elements from *Genesis*, but they are transformed. The rain was the carrier of death in the Bible, while in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* it brings life by saving the thirsty Mariner but also by returning the crew to a grotesque un-life.

Another connection to the Flood Narrative is the Albatross itself. It is reminiscent of Noah's dove, and in *Genesis 8*, the "7 days" symbolism appears again, this time in connection to the bird:

And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark;

And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth.

And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more (*The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Gen. 8, 10-12).

The dove's return signals salvation and it lifts Noah's spirit, much like how the Albatross was a guide and a symbol of hope to the sailors at first. By killing the bird of good omen, the Mariner is first frowned upon by other sailors, but then, as House notices, they "become accomplices in his crime. They do not know whether the fog and mist (along with the Albatross who brought them) are good or bad . . . , nor do they know whether the sun is good or bad" (59). The belief in the bird's allegedly good intentions is easily forgotten with the murder. Here the Mariner and the crew commit a sin against their possible saviour, as analogous to the Genesis Flood Narrative, since there the bird brings a good omen and is set free by Noah. The Mariner killed not only a bird whom "As if it had been a Christian soul/

We hail'd it in God's name," (65-66) but also their hope of salvation.

It can thus be argued that the severe punishment that the Mariner receives follows the punishments given by God in *The Book of Genesis*. Here, now, a question arises – what would have happened to Noah if one of the people on the Ark killed the Dove upon its return? The primal, frozen world in which the Mariner and his crew find themselves is reminiscent of the Flood Narrative's scarcity of life as well as of Narrative's need to preserve all life. If the albatross is taken as a bird of good omen, as it was in the Flood Narrative, then the Mariner effectively destroys not just the one being that could help them, but also God's willingness to save them, since the bird is one of God's creatures, just like the water-snakes and "[a]ll things both great and small" (Coleridge 616).

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is an experiment of retelling and reshaping the Biblical mythos found in Genesis. He reverses the order of the events of the Fall and evokes the story of Noah's Ark. The importance of the Snake as a participant of the Fall is reversed – the water snakes in the poem represent the spiritual ascent rather than sin. The Mariner is thus a Cain of the Romantic era who performs the sin of murder but repents it with the help of the accomplice in the Original Sin – the snake. The symbolism of seven days is closely connected to the Genesis Flood Narrative, as well as the bird of good omen that is present in both the Biblical account of the flood and the Mariner's story. In the end, the fall of Cain is the biggest influence of *The Book of Genesis* on the poem, and the other discussed elements connect to this central idea of murder as the original sin for which both Cain and the Mariner were punished. The bird and the water-snakes were not arbitrarily chosen by Coleridge to be the victims of the murder and the blessing; with them, he seamlessly connected the narratives discussed in this essay – the fall of Adam and Eve, the fall of Cain and the Flood Narrative to form a poem filled with Christian symbolism, but still done covertly enough so as not to be considered a *bibliolater*.

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