

2013

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### Recommended Citation

O'Neill, Christine (2013) "Genesis and the New Testament in *The Faerie Queene* Books I & II," *Proceedings of GREAT Day*: Vol. 2012 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2012/iss1/5>

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# Genesis and the New Testament in *The Faerie Queene* Book I & II

Christine O'Neill

## Introduction

It is impossible to quantify the collective impact that the Holy Bible<sup>1</sup> has had on literature since its creation thousands of years ago. A slightly less ambitious task for scholars would be tracing the influence the Bible had on Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, a monstrously long and sophisticated poem from which many Elizabethan playwrights and poets drew heavily. In much the same way the Bible is a compendium of religious narratives, records, epistles, and laws, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* is the result of many years of work and clearly benefitted from a great number of sources. Throughout all six of *The Faerie Queene*'s books and the two Cantos of Mutabilitie, the Bible appears to be the foremost of those sources.

At first glance, Spenser's masterpiece contains just as many (if not many more) allusions to classical Greek and Roman literature as it does to the Bible—however, the powerful sway of the Bible contributes structural components in addition to textual references. It ultimately dictates the nature and tempo of the story more than do Ovid or Homer. While the New Testament seems to have influenced the overarching themes and allegories present in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, specific allusions are most frequently drawn from the Old Testament. These Old Testament allusions, especially from Genesis, and New Testament themes—in regards to the Gospels, to the epistles, and to Revelation—are best exemplified in the Book of Holiness and Book of Temperance.

## Book I

The first virtue Spenser tackles is holiness, exhibited through the adventures of the Redcrosse Knight against Archimago, an evil sorcerer. Multiple incidents in this first book can be traced to the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The initial enemy that Redcrosse encounters is a dragon hybrid named Error, much like the original antagonist in Genesis—that is, a serpent with

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<sup>1</sup> I will use all references from the Bishop's Bible (1568) since that is the edition that Spenser (1552–1599) would have used.

legs. This dragon is meant to evoke both “the serpent,[which] was suttiller then euery beast of the fielde” (Gen 3:1) and Eve, who convinced Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, for Spenser describes it as, “Halfe like a serpent horribly displaide, / But th’ other halfe did womans shape retaine” (I.i.14.7–8). The literary representations of a half-woman, half-beast, reappear in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* some eighty years after Spenser’s publication. Spenser brilliantly ties together a direct reference to the two characters in Genesis who were responsible for the fall of man with an image from classical mythology. God and Redcrosse both triumph over their serpentine adversaries, and end up removing a part of the foes’ bodies—Redcrosse “raft her hatefull head” (I.i.24.8) while God removes the snake’s legs, saying: “vpon thy belly shalt thou go” (Gen 3:14).

In addition to detailing the fall of man, Genesis has a number of narratives that involve mistaken identities—Spenser borrows this idea to introduce the primary antagonist of *The Faerie Queene*, Archimago. As Redcrosse is wandering through the woods, he comes upon a man who seems to be a “godly father” (I.i.33.9) and decides to spend the night with him. In later cantos, Duessa is introduced as the virtuous Una’s malicious doppelganger, and Archimago disguises himself as Redcrosse (I.ii.11.1–2, 9). There are numerous examples in Genesis when characters put on the guise of another person to achieve desired ends. A few instances include when Jacob tricks his blind father into thinking he is Esau (Gen 28:6–40), Tamar posing as the temple prostitute (Gen 38:14–15), and Joseph’s pretending not to know his brothers when he is a vizier of Egypt (Gen 42:7–8). The main contrast is that while Spenser’s character dissembled with evil intent, the disguised characters of the Bible do so in accordance with God’s plan. Along with the instances of mistaken identities, Spenser references a handful of other Genesis stories.

Throughout the first book, Redcrosse’s adventures either contain a direct reference to, or seem to mimic narratives from Genesis. In the third canto, Sansloy’s duel with Archimago has an odd connection to Jacob’s faceoff with the angel at Peniel. In both cases, two men engage in combat while one hides his identity—the angel masquerading as a man, and Archimago pretending to be Redcrosse. At the end of both bouts of combat, the disguises are abandoned, and the victors each choose to let the losers go (although Jacob stipulates, “I will not let thee go, except thou blesse me” [Gen 32:26]). There is a name-change in each story—Jacob is granted the name Israel, ‘He who strives with God’, while ‘Redcrosse’ becomes Archimago. Just like with the group of mistaken identity stories, Spenser reverses the moral character of the combat. In the

Bible, two good guys fight, whereas two villains go head-to-head in *The Faerie Queene*. In borrowing the narrative structure of Jacob's fight, Spenser paints Archimago's contrivances as a mockery of righteousness, and perhaps makes a statement about his trickery and duplicity (for although Jacob is technically a Biblical hero, he uses questionable means to fulfill God's plans). Another instance of matched stories occurs with the sexual violation of Una in Canto VI.

The rape of Dinah and the rape of Una are very similar in all but one respect: Dinah is actually raped, whereas Una manages to escape with her purity. Dinah's fate is sealed when a foreign prince called Shechem beholds her beauty and "toke her, & lay with her, and forced her. And his heart laye vnto Dina the daughter of Iacob, and he loued that damsell, and spake kyndly vnto her" (Gen 34:2-3). The text indicates that, although he forces himself on her, he actually loves Dinah and treats her well afterwards, quite contrary to Sansloy's motivations. Rather, "with greedy force he gan the fort assayle" (I.VI.5.3) in "wrathfull fire" and "lustfull heat" (I.vi.3.3). Perhaps because Spenser knew that Sansloy was incapable of the love that Shechem bore, Spenser chose to have a pack of satyrs scare Sansloy away before he could finish the act. The revenge of Dinah's brothers is brutal and extreme—Simeon and Levi ask the men to circumcise themselves, and while Shechem's city is recovering, the brothers "toke eyther of them his sworde, and went into the citie boldely, and slue all that was male, And slue also Hemor and Sithem his sonne with the edge of the sworde" (Gen 34:25-26). Sansloy suffers a similarly degrading fate when Sir Satyrane, son of a satyr and a woman, engages him in a battle. Although Una flees before she can witness the end of their struggle (I.vi.47.8-9), Sansloy appears again in Book II, where he duels in order to win a woman "in [whose] loosenesse [he] tooke exceeding ioy" (II.ii.37.3). Sansloy does not actually rape Una, and so he does not suffer the magnitude of ignominy that Shechem did—he is, however, obviously still a slave to his lust. Although the links to the rape of Dinah are present, Spenser takes many liberties in shaping this old story to fit his new context. Examining connections to Genesis, however, only skims the surface: Spenser, more concerned with the Christian aspects of the Bible, focused much of Book I on New Testament themes as well.

Themes expressed in the Gospels often find their way into in *The Faerie Queene*; a particularly pervasive one is the difficulty of entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Although the Markan Jesus invites everyone to worship God and receive personal salvation, he also warns that, "It is easier for a camel to go thorowe the eye of a needle, then for the riche to enter into the

kyngdome of God” (10:25). Other Gospels then use locked-door imagery to express this. While Jesus says to Peter, “And I wyll geue vnto thee, the keyes of the kingdome of heauen” (Mt 16:19), Aldeboran the Church-robber finds “The dore... was not at his call” (I.iii.16.2, 4). In contrast, when Duessa leads Redcrosse to Lucifera’s hellish Palace, “Great groups of people traueild thitherward / Both day and night, of each degree and place” (I.iv.3.1–2), and because Redcrosse is so virtuous, he must face “an yron doore” (I.viii.37.3) when he tries to enter the bowells of Orgoglio’s castle. Spenser seems to be making the point that as difficult as it is for a sinner to get into heaven, it is equally difficult for someone pure of heart to find his or her way into hell. This heavily parallels with the idea of ‘justification through faith’, a theme propounded in the New Testament’s Pauline letters.

Much of Book One has to do with ecclesiastical material, as do the epistles in the New Testament. Paul is a champion of the Church, seeing it as the propagation of Christ Himself. He teaches in his epistles “howe thou oughtest to behaue thy selfe in the house of God, whiche is the Church of the lyuyng God, the pyller and grounde of trueth” (1 Tm 3:15). Spenser takes on many of the same symbols of Jesus’s life that the Church did. For instance, in Ephesians, Paul famously equates putting on armor as equipping oneself for a battle “agaynst rule, agaynst power, agaynst worldly gouernours of the darknesse of this worlde, agaynst spirituall craftynesse” (Ep 6:12). The idea of being a warrior in addition to a worshiper was extremely important in the early Church, where many martyrs suffered persecution. Crawford believes Redcrosse represents this armor, not only because of the opening passages describing the knight’s own armor, but Redcrosse’s general steadfastness. “In keeping with the conditions of the allegory in Book I,” Crawford points out, “the Red Cross Knight is a pilgrim to eternity. He represents the Church militant” (178).

But Spenser isn’t done with making connections to the early Church. One possible reading of 1 Corinthians is that Paul explains transubstantiation by saying that bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ (10:16). This interpretation was developed in the medieval Church, and one with which Spenser would likely be rather familiar. Wine in Book One of *The Faerie Queene* also has supernatural properties: it is used to treat Sansfoy’s wounds (I.v.17.4), and for Redcrosse and Una’s wedding celebration, “they sprinckle all the posts with wine” (I.xi.38.1), in addition to frankincense, perhaps a reference to the Nativity. Even during Redcrosse’s fight with the dragon at the end of the first book, so rife with parallels to Genesis,

Spenser makes larger thematic connections to the Church. As scholar Rudolf B. Gottfried points out, “in the end Redcross[e] overcomes the dragon with the strength supplied by the water of life and the tree of life, which represent the two sacraments accepted by the reformed church” (1365).

Although it takes some ideas from the epistles, the poem draws much more heavily on Revelation. The Book of Revelation is a favorite of Spenser’s, most likely due to the mythological imagery of beasts, animals, spirits, celestial bodies, and other symbolism. Much as *The Faerie Queene* itself can be an allegory for elements of the Bible, this book of the Bible is an allegory for the Kingdom of Heaven, and the end of the world. Animal imagery is strong in both pieces of literature. In Revelation, “a great multitude... stode before the throne, and before the lambe, clothed with long whyte garmentes” (7:9)—this lamb represents Jesus. Una, the purest character in the poem, carries with her “a milke white lambe... So pure and innocent” (I.i.4.9–5.1), suggesting that Christ is with her. In Revelation, a dragon is used to embody Satan—and in case readers did not catch that, John of Patmos drives the fact home in saying, “the dragon, that olde serpent, which is the deuyll and Satanas” (20:2). Redcrosse must face two dragons in Book One, the first a half-woman hybrid called Error, and the second a more palpable embodiment of the devil. Crawford cites Carol Kaske’s claim that, “his swift and final victory over Satan both on his own behalf and that of others” (176) shows Christ as the King of Heaven, the way he is presented in Revelation, and not a deity-*cum*-human, the way the Gospels represent him. The ties between Revelation and *The Faerie Queene* are quite prevalent in the first book.

Book One, out of all the books, is probably the heaviest with direct Biblical references; that does not mean, however, that the other books do not embody some of the same components. As Book Two traces Guyon’s temptation and victory, readers can see the same pattern of Old Testament allusions and New Testament themes.

## **Book II**

Spenser expresses the quality of Temperance in the second book, although editors Roche and O’Donnell warn us “to keep in mind that the word generally means ‘self-restraint’ and then to let Guyon’s adventures qualify and define the virtue further” (1108). Since holiness is a virtue directly addressed in the Bible, and temperance is one of the Four Cardinal Virtues (which Plato formulated and the early Church adapted), this transition between books means markedly fewer

Biblical allusions. The influence, however, remains in the nature of Guyon's adventures and the themes they embody.

Just as he did with Book One, Spenser uses his protagonist (in this case, Sir Guyon) to explore narratives from Genesis, although to a much smaller extent. For instance, Braggadocchio takes Guyon's spear just as Tamar takes Judah's staff; Braggadocchio also pursues a beautiful woman named Belphoebe, not realizing that she is armed with "deadly tooles" (II.iii.37.3), much in the same way Judah beds Tamar without imagining she has equipped herself to censure him (Gen 38). Another analogous situation is that of the squire whom Furor drags around in Canto IV. He, like Joseph, was a righteous man who fell victim to circumstance (or in this case, 'Occasion') and was enslaved. Also like Joseph, he is an ultimately good character who explains to those around him "what hard mishap him brought to such distresse" (II.iv.16.8). There is even an echo of the flood story, what with all the water in Book Two. A burning Pyrocles attempts to drown himself to escape Furor's flames—he wishes to abolish the fire of fury with water, the way God purged the world of sin with water. In Arthur's battle against Maleager, the only way the Prince can defeat the demon is to divorce him from his mother, the Earth, and throw him in a lake. In Genesis, the earth is the source of original sin (bearing the fruit from the forbidden tree, then becoming part of Adam's punishment, and producing the offering that led Cain to kill Abel), while the water of the flood is a purifying agent.

Finally, temperance, the very theme of this book, could have saved Adam and Eve from being cast out of Eden. Spenser already explored the Eden episode in Book One, but here he focuses on the Fall itself, as opposed to punishing the satanic snake. The Bower of Bliss, like Eden, is both a delightful garden and a source of great temptation. Temptation and trickery are *everywhere* in this book: Belphoebe tempts Braggadocchio and Trompart, Archimago tricks the same two men, and Phaedria tempts everyone she meets. Acrasia is evidently the most successful temptress, "many errant knights hath foule fordonne" (II.i.51.4) and is seen at the end of the book asleep with a man she has successfully seduced. Guyon sees these examples and learns from them, the same way readers are supposed to learn from Eve's lament: "the serpent begyled me, and I dyd eate" (Gen 3:13). In the first canto, Guyon is fooled and believes Archimago when he tells him that Redcrosse defiled a virgin—but by the end of the book, having mastered temperance, Guyon is able to defeat Acrasia with ease and "all those pleasant bowres and Pallace braue, / Guyon broke downe" (II.xii.83.1–2). Whitaker, citing Calvin's *Institutes*, declares that

Book II both “discuss[es] Adam’s fall” and “Christ’s role as a mediator”, nicely tying together the two testaments and giving testimony to the holistic impact of the Bible on *The Faerie Queene*.

Temptation, the opposite of temperance, is explored thoroughly in Book Two as well as in the Gospels. What Helen Cooney calls the “central issues” of Book Two, Guyon’s encounters with Phaedria and Mammon anchor this poem to the Bible by exemplifying two of the evils Christ preached against: lust (Mt 5:23) and money (Lk 12:33–34). “[B]oth have their genesis in a single Biblical text, chapter 7 of Matthew’s gospel, that part of the Sermon on the Mount in which Christ warns man that ‘Ye cannot serve God and riches’” (Cooney, 176), which shows Spenser’s focus is not only on the New Testament, but specifically on portraying Guyon as Jesus. This allegory crops up throughout all of Book Two. Guyon’s episode in the Bower of Bliss parallels strongly with Jesus’s temptation in the desert (Mt 4:1–11, Mk 1:12–13, Lk 4:1–14). Maurice Evans points out that “Guyon, like Christ, chooses to undergo temptation in order that his virtue may be strengthened” and furthermore notes, “when he has come through the ordeal, like Christ he receives the ministration of angels” (88). Both Guyon and Jesus take mercy on evildoers, like when Jesus pardons the woman about to be stoned and when Guyon permits Pyrochles to live after defeating him (Joh 8:7, II.v.14.1). Additionally, both suffer in a garden before facing death: Jesus in Gethsemane and Guyon in Proserpina (Mt 26:36, II.vi.53.1). But neither character—nor the rest of the human race, according to the Bible—faces his trials alone.

The “comely Palmer” who “Him als accompanyd vpon the way” (II.i.7.1–2) bears similarities to the Holy Spirit mentioned in the New Testament epistles. Whitaker astutely notes that “Red Cross must be separated from Una before he can fall into sin, just as Guyon in Book II must be separated from the Palmer or right reason before he can be tempted” (157). In this way, Guyon’s Palmer seems to act as a conscience, much like the Holy Spirit—a force which is above reason, but guides it. “And greeue not the holy spirite of God, by whom ye are sealed vnto the day of redemption” (Ep 4:30) the author of Ephesians advises, reminding his recipients that even if they ‘forget’ their conscience (as Guyon and the Palmer were separated), they cannot abandon the Spirit and they will be held accountable on the Last Day (as evidenced by Guyon’s reunion with the Palmer [II.viii.4.8]). The Holy Spirit is also a source of hope and power (Rom 15:13), two gifts that the Palmer bestows upon Guyon time and again. As Spenser so succinctly declares in the opening to the last canto, “Guyon by Palmers gouernance, / passing through perils great, /



Doth overthrow the Bowre of blisse, / and Acrasie defeat” (II.xiii). Much in the same way that Paul draws strength from the Spirit to complete his evangelical missions overseas, Guyon too depends on the Palmer to lead him through a literal sea of troubles.

While the Palmer portrays a message from epistles, the antagonistic women in Book II provide connections to Revelation. The figure of the Great Whore is a prominent aspect of Revelation, representing Babylon, or more broadly, infidelity to God. Guyon runs into a number of women who correspond to the Great Whore, among them the mermaids, Medina’s sisters Elissa and Perissa, Phaedria, and Acrasia. Like the mermaids, the Great Whore “sitteth vpon many waters” (Rev 17:1). Just as the sisters delight in the battle of Sansloy and Hudibras, the woman from Revelation is “dronken with the blood of the martirs” (17:6). Phaedria is a temptress like the Great Whore, an idea that Spenser underscores by giving them similar appearances. Phaedria, whose name means ‘shining one’ (Roche and O’Donnell, 1118), dons herself “With gaudie girlonds, or fresh flowrets” (II.vi.7.4), while Revelation’s “woman was arayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with golde, precious stone, and pearles” (17:4). Both are gaudy and flashy in appearance, although Phaedria takes her gaudiness from nature while the Whore adorns herself in worldly riches. Here, Spenser removes Phaedria from the Whore a little bit, if only to make Acrasia’s similarities to her more striking. Acrasia seduces a man “With cup thus charmd” (II.i.55.3), indicating that she possesses “a cup of golde” (Rev 17:4) as does the Great Whore. Acrasia also has the power to transform the men she seduces into beasts, reminiscent of the “scarlet coloured beast, ful of names of blasphemie, which had seuen heades, and ten hornes” that the Great Whore sits upon (Rev 17:3). All of these women, like the Great Whore, are either avoided or defeated by the end of the book.

The Book of Temperance stresses New Testament material more heavily than that of the Old Testament, resulting in the emergence of Guyon as a Christ-figure. Spenser carefully selects Genesis stories as well as ideas from the epistles and Revelation in order to highlight the role of personal strength in overcoming temptation.

### **Conclusion**

*The Faerie Queene* is a poem so obviously influenced by the Bible that many scholars no longer feel the need to comment on this connection, turning instead to less propounded feminist or new historicist readings. Biblical ties, however, run deeper than just the “holiness” theme of Book One and the arrant holiness of the Bible. Spenser takes many narratives from Genesis,

modifies them, and creates a world for Redcrosse and Guyon suggestive of that in the Torah. Often Spenser borrows the framework and not the actual events of a narrative, instead changing details of the stories for the effect of juxtaposition, or simply to fit *The Faerie Queene's* plot. Spenser draws on Genesis narratives such as the fall of man, Jacob's fight at Peniel, Judah and Tamar, and the rape of Dinah. Equally important is the New Testament, in which the knights' quests embody concepts from the epistles and Revelation. The actions of both Redcrosse and Guyon parallel those of Jesus.

Rudolf B. Gottfried and Virgil K. Whitaker, however, caution readers not see the characters of Book One simply as one-dimensional representations of other things in spite of their essentially allegorical nature. Indeed, Redcrosse's behavior is often more evocative of Old Testament characters (he is a warrior, like Joab or Joshua), than the nonviolent, rabbinical Jesus of Nazareth. Similarly, when Guyon is tempted, he does not resist the temptations as wholly as Jesus does, but rather shows signs of weakness and consequently suffers—take, for example, the Mammon episode—even though he is ultimately considered a hero (like David and Samson). It is also worth noting that Prince Arthur, who has a small yet significant role in both books, is supposed to be the 'real' Christ figure, rescuing both heroes when they are in dire straits—which must alter our perceptions of the knights. So while Redcrosse and Guyon may personify elements that are also present in Christ's life, Spenser seems open to using both men as a representations of many different Biblical subject matters.

In the movement from Book One to Book Two—holiness to temperance—readers can see a shift from emphasis on the Old Testament to emphasis on the New Testament. This makes sense, since holiness would be more involved with references to the stories that are the core of the faith—Adam and Eve's classic mistake, Jacob's heroic battle with the angel—whereas temperance or 'self-restraint' is a quality more championed in the Gospels and epistles. We should also note that Spenser alludes most heavily from the first book of the Bible (Genesis), and the last (Revelation)—perhaps in an attempt to reconcile two very different literary works with nearly three millennia between them. I hope we can agree that he manages to do so quite effectively. Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* draws on the whole spectrum of the Holy Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

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*The online version of the Bishop's Bible that I used can be found here:*

*<http://www.studydrive.org/desk/?query=ge+I&t=bis&st=I&new=I&l=en>*

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<sup>2</sup> My in text citations of *The Faerie Queene* read like this: (I.i.1.1)—they signify: (Book. Canto. Stanza. Line).

<sup>3</sup> To be clear, I used this book not only for the actual text of *The Faerie Queene*, but also for the critical material in the footnotes. Critical notes will be cited as "Roche and O'Donnell."