
Old Law and New Law: Typological Allegory in the Play

Elizabethans studied the Bible according to typological doctrine. Typology sought to resolve the problem of broken continuity between Old and New Testaments by positioning the Old Testament (the Old Law) as the foreshadowing of its own fulfillment by the New Testament (the New Law). A significant schism between the Old and New Law was that between the legitimacy of salvation through "antinomianism" or "legalism." Legalism, as described by Christian theology, is an inappropriate dedication to laws, specifically Mosaic Law. Used pejoratively, legalism indicated an individual's insensitivity and misplaced pride, as well as a display of neglect for the ideas of mercy and faith taught by the New Law. William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* offers insight into the conflicting ideas of the law, mercy, salvation, and the grace of God that are present in the Old and New Law. Through typological references to the Biblical story of Jacob, Shakespeare argues for the Elizabethan belief of antinomianism over legalism and the succession of the New Law over the Old.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, is the antagonist, but his character cannot simply be reduced to the status of villain. Shylock is a follower of Mosaic Law, and believes his actions to be in strict adherence to the law. In Act IV scene i, Shylock makes all aware that "I stand for judgment" and beyond all else "I crave the law" (4.1.103, 204). In the eyes of the Elizabethan audience, he is Jewish and legalist, and can therefore never accept the ideals of Divine Law, mercy, and forgiveness. Shakespeare created a character that deems himself, his occupation, and his actions to be true and justified in accordance with his law, his faith, and his circumstances. However, for the Christian audience, those same actions would be perceived as an allegiance to pride and vengeance.

Shylock's occupation in the field of usury, the charging of exorbitant, high interest rates for loaned money, was viewed by Elizabethans as an appalling indication of the usurer's unbridled greed. In England usury had been an official reason for the Edict of Expulsion, but in Venice it was necessary for the further development of the merchant economy. In Act I scene iii, Shylock tries to justify the charge of interest on loans.

He begins by the retelling of Genesis 30.25-43, the story of Jacob and Laban's sheep, but is urged by Antonio to get to the point of his story. Irritated and disdainful, Antonio asks, "[and] what of him? Did he charge interest?" (1.3.73). Shylock responds, "No, not take interest, not as you would say/ Directly interest" (1.3.74-5). That is, Jacob became very wealthy from his resourcefulness. Shylock's final point is that "This was a way to thrive, and he was blest/ And thrift is blessing, if men steal it is not" (1.3.87-8). Antonio debunks Shylock's justification stating it was "A thing not in his power to bring to pass/ But swayed and fashioned by the hand of

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heaven" (3.1.90-1). It was not Jacob's resourcefulness, but God's will that made Jacob wealthy and prosperous. It is odd that Shylock would use such an argument to defend usury. It intertwines usury with trickery, and that any fortune is a blessing as long as it is not stolen. A better justification would have been Deuteronomy 23. 20-1:

"Unto a foreigner thou mayest lend upon interest; but unto thy Brother thou shalt not end upon interest; that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all that thou putttestthy hand unto, in the land whither thou goest in to possess it".

The weakness of Shylock's justification suggests that Shakespeare intended to draw a parallel between Shylock and Jacob. In Act II scene v, Shylock states "By Jacob's staff I swear" (2.5.37); and it is also noted that Shylock's wife was named Leah, the name of Jacob's first wife. The most interesting parallel is suggested in Act I scene iii, where Shylock utters to himself that "If I can catch him [Antonio] once upon the hip" (1.3.43). As Jacob was traveling to confront Esau, he encountered a stranger on the path and struggled with him. Genesis 32.26 states that "When the man saw that he could not prevail over him, he struck Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the hip socket was wretched as they wrestled". Shylock hopes that God will deliver him to Antonio, just as God delivered the flocks to Jacob. He wants Antonio to be helpless and vulnerable.

Indeed, Antonio does become helpless, and when the news is delivered, Shylock shouts "I thank God! I thank God!". If the Old Law was taken into account, and the debt was currency, then Shylock would be righteous, however, he goes too far with his desire for flesh, violating both Mosaic and Venetian Law. His strict adherence to the Old Law is left in shambles with his need for Antonio's flesh, as he, unknowingly, begins to violate Exodus 21.23-25: "But if there is a serious injury you are to take life for life, eye for eye, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise". The injuries Shylock has endured were serious at an emotional level, but by no means, serious in any physical sense.

Shakespeare turns Shylock into a blood thirsty beast, announcing "I am a dog, beware my fangs" (3.3.7). He abandons a sense of his own humanity, compounding his inability to accept the New Law of mercy and forgiveness that was his only hope. God appears to have abandoned Shylock, eventually leaving him with a mixed understanding of justice and without his religion. He is defeated by a more vigorous adherence to the law. Why would God abandon Shylock?

The explanation starts as Act II scene ii begins, the clown Lancelot debates whether to continue to serve his Jewish master or to serve a new Christian master. Eventually, Lancelot decides that "...the Jew is the very devil incarnation" and that "I will run" (2.2.25, 29). On his way to his new master, Lancelot encounters his "more than sand-blind, / high gravel-blind" father, who "knows

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me not" (2.2.33-34). Lancelot plays a trick on his father, leading him to believe his son has "gone to heaven" (2.2.61-2). After a bit of joking, Lancelot reveals that he is his son, and, mockingly, gets down on one knee asking his father to "Give me your blessing" (2.2.75). A peculiar observation is made by the old Gobbo. He remarks on Lancelot's facial hair, with a sense of amazement, "What a beard thou hast got!" (2.2.89-90).

The incident between Lancelot and old Gobbo is a reference to the story of Jacob and Esau, and Lancelot's preference to a Christian master should not be overlooked. If interpreted typologically, the scene refers to the passing of God's favor. Just as the blessing and birth right was passed from Esau to Jacob, Christ passed God's favor from the Jewish community to the Christians. The Old Law was seen as fulfilled and surpassed by the New Testament, the spirit, offering grace and mercy, became more important and influential than the law.

Shylock's use of reference to Jacob is thus in vain. For the Elizabethans, Jacob represents the Christian community: God will not deliver Antonio to the Jew, but the Jew to the Christians. Gratiano shouts "Now, infidel, I have you on the hip" (4.1.332). Ironically, Shylock refers to Portia as "A Daniel Come to judgment" (4.1.221). As the decision begins to turn against Shylock, Gratiano shouts "...a second Daniel! / I thank thee, Jew, for teaching me that word" (4.1.37-8). The word Daniel means "God is my Judge", as if God were reigning down the decision and judgment onto Shylock. Shylock is forced to convert, losing the applications of the Old Law, and Antonio is saved and handed back wealth for his "mercy".

According to Shakespeare, if the law is wielded in the absence of the ideals of justice, grace, and mercy - the Old Law - it will result in terrible judgments. However, if used in conjunction with the ideals of the New Law, divine judgment will be handed to man. The Divine Law an individual follows may not make him a reprehensible villain, but it will render him an outcast from a society marked by shifting morals and religious beliefs.

Works Cited

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