

# Biblical references in shakespeare's the tempest



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

**Biblical references in Shakespeare's The Tempest**

So much concerns, so much has been said, done, or written about William Shakespeare and his works; there are memorials, museums, theaters in his honor, full actors and actresses companies dedicated to perform only Shakespearean drama, there are even lots of "Shakespearean scholars", biographers, etc. He had been given the title of "The Bard of Avon", because of the old English word which means "Poet", and also because of the Avon river which flows through his hometown, Stratford-Upon-Avon, in which he was born and baptized in April 1564. Notwithstanding, Shakespeare's reputation is nowadays so huge among English poets that he's often called just "The Bard"; the one and the only English poet who has transcended so many generations and has served as a source of inspiration for so many writers throughout history.

His life has been subjected to deep research, analysis, and infinite speculations with many different points of view. One of the fields in which one can go through (and which it will be certainly done) is Shakespeare's religion and the influence this could have had into his life and works. So many scholars have dared to give their opinions and make judgments of William's religion according to his life, his family, and by analyzing his works as well. Some of them adjudicate him as a Catholic, regarding specially his origins and Catholic backgrounds; According to Peter Ackroyd (2005) in Shakespeare the Biography, Shakespeare's mother, Mary Arden, was the member of a noticeable and firmly Catholic family in Warwickshire. Other scholars and biographers say that William Shakespeare was actually a Protestant. The Shakespeare editor and historian A. L. Rowse (1963) firmly

assures that Shakespeare was baptized, grew up, married, and buried into the arms of the Orthodox Church.(p. 43). And finally, the most common trend among modern scholars is that of Shakespeare's atheism, based on absence towards two different conceptions; absence of direct references to any sacred book or verse; and absence of Shakespeare himself at the religious services. According to Joseph Pearce (2008), there was a man called John Payne Collier, (a notorious forger of historical documents) who examined the records of St Saviour's, South wark Cathedral, and found that Shakespeare, alone among his fellow actors, was not shown as regular attendant to the church. (p. 126).

Thomas Carter in Shakespeare and Holy Scripture argues that " no writer has assimilated the thoughts and reproduced the words of Holy Scripture more copiously than Shakespeare."(Carter, 1905, p. 3)

The following paper argues the fact that William Shakespeare's Biblical knowledge has had a deep and clear influence in the writing of " The Tempest". Three main aspects are going to be considered: The references to Ariel in the books of Isaiah, Psalms, and proverbs; and the story of Joseph, the later leader of one of the Tribes of Israel, in the book of Genesis which inspired Shakespeare order to shape the plot line and development of the character Prospero, in The Tempest. For this purpose, The Tempest, The Holy Bible (in the Geneva Version), the comic The Tempest by Gaiman are going to be the resources to be cited, among others.

ADD MORE INFO

ROAR OF LIONS= ARIEL= Psalm 22: 12-13= Proverbs 19: 12, 20: 2

<https://assignbuster.com/biblical-references-in-shakespeares-the-tempest/>

WOE TO YOU ARIEL= Isaiah 29= LION OF GOD?

### **Joseph & Prospero**

The Bible tells us in Genesis 39-47 about the story of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, Hebrews living in the land of Canaan. He was the favorite son among his brothers, and they were so jealous because of that, that they plotted to kill him. However, they did not fear to kill him and decided to throw him into a pit, and then sell him to some Midianites merchants on their way to Egypt. The merchants finally sold him to the Egyptians, and once there, even though Joseph went through some distress (getting in jail for example), God's favor was always with him. This made him able to interpret the Pharaoh's dreams, and due to that, they could predict and get prepared for seven years of hunger, and Joseph won the Pharaoh's trust. He finally had the possibility to meet with his brothers again, and forgive them for their betrayal.

Now, in which way can these events and facts be related to the ones which Prospero had to go through? A step to step analysis is going to be developed.

First of all, Joseph and Prospero parallel each other as victims of jealous siblings. Unfavored siblings in both works cannot stand the fact that the protagonists are receiving special privileges and that potentially (in the case of Joseph) or actually (in the case of Prospero) are ruling them.

The narration in Genesis states, " So when his brethren saw that their father loved him more than all his brethren, then they hated him, and could not speak peaceably unto him." (37: 4 Geneva Bible) They hate Joseph even more after he tells them of dreams suggesting that someday he will rule over

<https://assignbuster.com/biblical-references-in-shakespeares-the-tempest/>

them. "[...] shalt thou reign over us, and rule us? Or shalt thou have altogether dominion over us?" (37: 8)

In *The Tempest*, Prospero did not need a dream to reign over his brother Antonio; he actually was the original ruler of their home city-state, Milan. But Prospero, as well as Joseph, was somehow a dreamer too, more interested in books rather than in the affairs of the government, giving Antonio the opportunity to plot with Alonso, King of Naples, and overthrow Prospero usurping the dukedom for himself. (Shakespeare, 1611. Act 1, sc, 2, 66-132).

Since Prospero was popular with the common people, they did not dare to kill him. Instead, they put him and his daughter Miranda in a boat, and leaving them adrift in the sea, leaving their fate to the mercy of the elements:

In few, they hurried us aboard a barque,  
Bore us some leagues to sea, where they prepared  
A rotten carcass of a butt, not rigged,  
Nor tackle, sail, nor mast—the very rats  
Instinctively have quit it. There they hoist us,  
To cry to th' sea that roared to us, to sigh  
To th' winds, whose pity, sighing back again,  
Did us but loving wrong. (Act I, sc 2, 144-151)

These harsh conditions can be clearly compared to the ones in Genesis, as something very similar happens to Joseph; when the opportunity is given, his brothers “conspired against him for to slay him.” (37: 18) but then they decided to “Shed not blood” (37: 22) and throw him into a pit without any food or water for then selling him to Midianite merchants, leaving his fate to the mercy them (37: 23-28).

Later on then, in both works, Joseph and Prospero use their ingeniousness to success in an foreign and unknown land. Actually, they both become rulers of their new land, by using their wisdom and abilities combined with supernatural forces (magic, God’s favor) to gain power. On one hand, Joseph is sold again, this time in Egypt, where he is imprisoned on false charges. But “the LORD was with him; for whatsoever he did, the LORD made it to prosper.” (39: 23) Joseph was given the ability to interpret dreams, and this talent calls the Pharaoh’s attention; Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams which no other wizard or soothsayer could, foretelling seven years of plentiful harvests followed by seven years of hunger, and suggesting a plan for crop rationing in order to save food for the famine times.

This impresses the Pharaoh so much, that he gives Joseph domain over the whole land of Egypt (41: 41). On the other hand, Prospero comes ashore on a unknown island, in his own words, “By Providence divine” (Act. I, sc 2, 159) and there, he uses the magic he has learned from books to overthrow the witch who had ruled and become ruler himself—although the island is so desolate that as Caliban points out to him, “I am all the subjects that you have” (1. 2. 344).

- Joseph and Prospero eventually achieve positions of power over their former betrayers. Both can choose from a variety of actions: seek revenge, test for signs of repentance, or offer forgiveness. Both men eventually choose all three, in the aforementioned order.

-By the time Joseph and Prospero confront their former betrayers, years after the betrayal, the onetime conspirators are helpless, having been humbled

and unknowingly brought to the protagonist by what appear to be forces of nature but are actually supernatural forces. In Genesis, when the famine comes—reflecting God’s will, given that Joseph, the man favored by God, could predict it—Israel and his sons are starving, while Joseph and the Egyptians have plenty.

- Thus, Joseph’s brothers—all except Benjamin, the youngest

and the new favorite of the father—must go to Egypt and beg to buy corn from

Joseph. Although they do not recognize him, he recognizes them, and he real-

izes, as they bow helplessly before him, that his earlier dreams of ruling over them have been fulfilled (41. 50-42. 9).

- Prospero, in turn, after twelve years on the island creates his own “supernatural nature”: when a ship carrying his former enemies passes near, Prospero conjures up the tempest that gives the play its name, and his enemies are washed ashore after a shipwreck, with Alonso disconsolate because he thinks his son Ferdinand has drowned in the storm. Although they cannot see Prospero unless he chooses, he can see them when he chooses (3. 3. 17-93), and he realizes, as they struggle helplessly before his magic, that his longtime dreams of repaying his enemies can now be fulfilled.

- Initially, Joseph and Prospero make their former betrayers squirm and regret their past cruelty, even associating that cruelty with the possible death of a beloved child. Although Joseph provides his siblings with the corn they seek, he employs subordinates to confuse and torment them by planting circumstantial evidence suggesting they are thieves (42. 24-28). He also briefly imprisons them on false charges, thus making them undergo what he suffered after their transgressions in the past. He leaves one brother imprisoned, so that their father thinks he may be dead (42. 36), and pressures the others to produce Benjamin, the youngest brother, moving the remaining brothers to say to each other, “ No doubt we deserve to be punished because of our brother [Joseph], whose suffering we saw; for when he pleaded with us we refused to listen” 226(42. 9-21).

- In The Tempest, Prospero employs spirits to confuse and torment his former betrayers, and has his supernatural servant Ariel remind them of their past transgressions until Alonso laments that the thunder proclaimed his



transgressions against Prospero, transgressions for which he believes he has been punished by his son's death (3. 3. 97-100).

- But Joseph and Prospero do not simply torment their former betrayers into repentance; they also test them by virtually replicating the circumstances of the original betrayal, in effect giving the betrayers a second chance. Joseph manipulates the brothers into agreeing that if one of them can be proven to have stolen from Joseph, he should become Joseph's slave; he then uses planted evidence to frame Benjamin. Thus, the brothers face essentially the same question they faced years earlier when they sold Joseph: Will they be party to the enslavement of their younger brother, their father's favorite, despite his innocence? They redeem themselves by pleading Benjamin's case, one even offering to take Benjamin's place as slave (44. 1-34).

- While *The Tempest* resembles the Joseph account in replicating the circumstances of the initial betrayal, the guilty brother's response is much different—a contrast contributing to the unstable nature of the ending to Shakespeare's play. Prospero causes Alonso and his guards to fall asleep, while Antonio and Alonso's brother Sebastian remain awake, unaware that Prospero is alive and following their actions.

- Thus, the earlier situation is replicated: An oblivious ruler could be supplanted by a conspiracy between that ruler's brother and the ruler of another Italian city-state. But far from redeeming himself, Antonio suggests to Sebastian that the two of them should kill the sleeping Alonso, thus allowing Sebastian to usurp his brother's kingdom (2. 1. 205-98); they even explicitly compare this with Antonio's earlier overthrow of Prospero as they

prepare to carry out the murder (2. 1. 271-76, 292-94). Prospero must employ Ariel to save Alonso's life (2. 1. 299-307).

- Unlike Joseph's brothers, Prospero's brother Antonio remains a dangerous man, one to be watched closely.

- Despite Antonio's unrepentant nature, in both works the protagonists eventually forgive their brothers—although they do so from a position of absolute power.

- His torments and tests of his brothers complete, Joseph finally reveals his identity to them (45. 1-4). And although his brothers fear further reprisals and beg forgiveness (50. 15-18), Joseph magnanimously tells them, "Do not be distressed or take it amiss that you sold me into slavery here . . ." (45. 5)—a statement made easier by his brothers' groveling before him in his role as virtual ruler.

- Similarly, Prospero eventually decides to act "in virtue [rather] than in vengeance" (5. 1. 28) and reveals himself to Antonio and Alonso. He also tells his brother, "I do forgive thy rankest fault"—although he forgives only on the condition that he be restored to his former, and rightful, position as Duke of Milan (5. 1. 131-34).<sup>227</sup> Last, in their entire experience with betrayal, exile, redemption, and reconciliation, Joseph and Prospero are instruments of a divine plan to save not only the current generation but also its descendants. Moreover, through forgiving those who betrayed them, Joseph and Prospero not only unite families but also unite states that had been historically unfriendly to each other. Joseph invites all his brothers and

their father, Israel—effectively inviting “ the twelve tribes of Israel”—to live with him in Egypt, and they accept (45. 9-13, 46. 1-7).

- Joseph explains to his brothers that the reason they should not feel guilty about having sold him into slavery is that if they had not done so, many people would have starved and the “ tribes of Israel” would have been wiped out: “[I]t was God who sent me ahead of you to save men’s lives. . . . [and] to ensure that you will have descendants on earth, and to preserve you all, a great band of survivors” (45. 5-7). In addition, Joseph has by now married and had sons by the daughter of an Egyptian priest, giving Jews and Egyptians a shared set of descendants (41. 45, 50-52). Thus, Joseph’s early misfortunes were part of a divine plan for the future state of Israel.

- In *The Tempest*, Prospero has arranged that his daughter (the rightful Duchess of Milan) and Alonso’s son (the heir to the throne of Naples) should fall in love with each other, and as the play ends, the lovers’ imminent marriage promises to unite the formerly hostile Italian city-states and give them a shared set of descendants. This conclusion supports Prospero’s earlier observation that although he and Miranda were exiled from Milan through foul play, they were “ blessedly” helped onto the island (1. 2. 62-63). And Gonzalo, a courtier and an old friend of Prospero’s, states on learning of the upcoming marriage of Prospero’s daughter to Alonso’s son that it is the gods that “ have chalked forth the way / Which brought us hither” and that Prospero was “ thrust from Milan, that his issue / Should become kings of Naples” (5. 1. 2058). Although Shakespeare perhaps had to refer to “ the gods” rather than “ God” because of a 1606 law banning references to “ God” onstage (Bevington 1204), the play suggests that

<https://assignbuster.com/biblical-references-in-shakespeares-the-tempest/>

Prospero's earlier misfortunes were part of a larger divine plan for "descendants on earth."

- In Genesis, however, God's divine plan for Joseph's descendants has a darker side. Many years earlier, God had told Joseph's great-grandfather Abraham, "[Y]our descendants will be aliens living in a land that is not theirs; they will be slaves, and will be held in oppression there for four hundred years" (15: 13). Years after Joseph's people were reunited in Egypt, the Egyptians enslaved the Jews, treating them "with ruthless severity" and subjecting them to "every kind of hard labor" (Exod. 1. 13-14).

- It is here that a typological reading destabilizes the optimistic ending of *The Tempest*. While Shakespeare's play seems to end with a vision of perfect order and reconciliation, the forces of disorder remain intact and largely unrepentant. For Prospero and his people, as for Joseph and his, the "reconciliation to a richer and fuller life" may be only temporary (Traversi 269-70). Shakespeare may have at least subconsciously created a level of religious allegory that undermines the "brave new world" (5. 1. 185) and subtly questions the wisdom of Prospero's decision to act in "virtue [rather] than in vengeance" (5. 1. 28).