

Biblical Imagery in Macbeth

No book has made a greater impact on world literature than the Bible. "It has colored the talk of the household and the street, as well as molded the language of the scholars. It has been something more than a 'well of English undefiled', it has become part of the spiritual atmosphere. We hear the echoes of its speech everywhere and the music of its familiar phrases haunts all the fields and groves of our fine literature" (Ackermann 9). Shakespeare's debt to Scripture is profound; biblical imagery is woven into every play. No writer has integrated the expressions and themes found in the Bible into his own work more magnificently than Shakespeare. It would take volumes to examine comprehensively Shakespeare's use of biblical imagery, so I will limit the discussion to one play -- Macbeth. Please note that the biblical quotes used in this article are taken from the King James Authorized Version, unless otherwise stated. Shakespeare himself would have been most familiar with an earlier version of the Bible, possibly the Geneva Bible, the Bishop's Bible, or the Great Bible, because the first edition of the King James Bible (Authorized Version) did not appear until 1611. I have divided the discussion of biblical imagery in Macbeth into acts and scenes for easy reference.

Act 1, Scene 2

Sergeant: Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorise another Golgotha (1.2.45)

Commentary: A reference to Christ's death upon Mount Calvary, as reported in Matthew 27.33: "And when they were come unto a place called Golgotha, that is to say, a place of a skull." According to John 19.34, a Roman soldier pierced Christ's side as he hanged from the cross. Shakespeare's Sergeant tells King Duncan that the army he has just encountered is as violent and remorseless as the soldiers who put Christ to death.

Ross: God save the king! (1.2.48)

Commentary: Although Shakespeare would have been familiar with this now commonplace salutation simply by living under monarchical rule, the saying originated in the Bible. In 1 Samuel 10.24 the people greet King Saul: "And all the people shouted, and said, God save the king."

Act 1, Scene 3

First Witch: All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis! (1.3.51)

Commentary: "All hail" is a common greeting in the New Testament, but one use of the phrase stands out in particular when discussing this passage from Macbeth. In Matthew 26.49, Judas prepares to betray Jesus to the Sanhedrin and Roman soldiers. His plan is to identify Jesus by greeting him with a kiss so that the soldiers will know which man to arrest. Judas approaches Jesus, saying, "Hail Master." The Witches greet Macbeth in a similar fashion, and, as Judas betrayed Jesus, so do the Witches betray Macbeth.

Banquo: If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me (1.3.60)

Commentary: Banquo, unconvinced that the Witches can foresee the future, makes reference to Ecclesiastes 11.6: "In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thine hand: for thou knowest not whether shall prosper, either this or that, or whether they both shall be alike good."

Banquo: And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,

The instruments of darkness tell us truths, (1.3.123-4)

Commentary: Satan using Holy Scripture to lead us into sin is a common theme throughout the Bible. In Corinthians 11.13-14 we are told, "For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into the apostles of Christ.

And no marvel; for Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light". In Matthew 4.6, Satan attempts to use Scripture to tempt the Lord: "If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee; and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone." Jesus replies, "It is written again/Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God."

Macbeth: Come what come may

Time and the hour runs through the roughest day. (1.3.156-7)

Commentary: A reference to two passages from the Bible: John 9.4: "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh when no man works"; and Job 7.1,2: "Is there not an appointed time to man upon the earth? and are not his days as the days of an hireling. As a servant longeth for the shadow, and as an hireling looketh for the end of his work."

Act 1, Scene 4

Duncan: There's no art

To find the mind's construction in the face (1.4.15-6)

Commentary: Note the similarities to Samuel 16.7: "For God seeth not as man seeth: for man looketh upon the outward appearance, but the Lord beholdeth the heart".

Duncan: I have begun to plant thee, and will labour

To make thee full of growing. Noble Banquo,

That hast no less deserved, nor must be known (35)

No less to have done so, let me enfold thee

And hold thee to my heart. (1.4.34-7)

Commentary: The metaphor of growth permeates the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. Notice Jeremiah 11.16: "For the Lord called thy name, a green olive tree, fair, and of goodly fruit; with the noise of a great tumult he hath kindled fire upon it, and the branches of it are broken."; Jeremiah 12.2: "Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins."; and Psalms 92.12,13: "The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon/Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God." In the New Testament, the metaphor appears in Corinthians 3.6,7: "I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase/So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase". Shakespeare is careful to illustrate Duncan's status as divinely appointed king throughout the play. Duncan's goodness is necessary to enhance Macbeth's feelings of guilt and remorse.

Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth: Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes (1.5.50)

Commentary: A reference to Job 24.13: "These are they that abhor the light: they know not the ways thereof, nor continue in the paths thereof. The murderer riseth early and killeth the poor and the needy, and in the night he is as a thief". The connection between hell and smoke is found in Revelation 14.11: "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever..."; and in Revelation 18.9: "And the

kings of the earth, who have committed fornication and lived deliciously with her, shall bewail her, and lament for her, when they shall see the smoke of her burning". Lady Macbeth here calls upon the darkness to enshroud her in a veil of smoke so that she may not see the evil deed she desires to commit.

Macbeth: My dearest love, 65

Duncan comes here to-night.

Lady Macbeth: And when goes hence?

Macbeth: To-morrow, as he purposes.

Lady Macbeth: O, never

Shall sun that morrow see! (1.5.65-70)

Commentary: A thought expressed in James 4.13: "Go to now, ye that say, today or tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away."

Act 1, Scene 6

Duncan: This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air

Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself

Unto our gentle senses.

Banquo: This guest of summer,

The temple-haunting martlet, does approve (1.6.1)

Commentary: Tradition tells us that the gentle martlet will not build a nest in or near unjust houses.

Notice the irony in Banquo's approval of the castle that will be the location of Duncan's murder. The reference to the "temple-haunting martlet" comes from Psalms 84.2,3: "Yea, the sparrow hath found her an house, and the swallow a nest for her, where she may lay her young: even by thine altars, O Lord of Hosts". A similar passage can be found in Baruch 6.20: "In the temple the owls, swallows, and birds fly."

Act 1, Scene 7

Macbeth: If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well

It were done quickly (1.7.1)

Commentary: Within this passage is a clear reference to the words spoken by Jesus to Judas in John 13.27: "That thou doest, do quickly." Macbeth is painfully aware of his bond with Judas.

Macbeth: But in these cases

We still have judgment here; that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return

To plague the inventor: (1.7.8-11)

Commentary: Macbeth's speech reflects the common biblical theme known best by the passage from Galatians 6.7: "Be not deceived: God is not mocked: for what so ever a man soeth, that shall he also reap". The theme is continued in Job 4.8: "They that plow iniquity and sow wickedness, reap the same"; and in Wisdom of Solomon 11.13: "Wherewith a man sinneth, by the same also shall he be punished."

Macbeth: I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself (1.7.25-7)

Commentary: The "vaulting ambition" to which Macbeth refers is the pride so condemned in the Bible. In Matthew 23.12 we read: "For whosoever will exalt himself, shall be brought low"; and in Proverbs 29.23 we read: "The pride of a man shall bring him low". Proverbs 16.18 tells us that: "Pride goeth before destruction, and a high mind before the fall."

Act 2, Scene 1

Macbeth: Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time (2.1.65-9)

Commentary: Macbeth knows that, although those around him are unaware of his crimes, the earth and the heavens know all. Notice the similarities to Job 20.27: "The heaven shall declare his wickedness, and the earth shall rise up against him". Notice also the connection to Habakkuk 2.10,11: "Thou hast consulted shame to thine own house, by destroying many people, and hast sinned against thine own soule. For the stone shall cry out of the wall and the beam out of the timber shall answer it, woe unto him that buildeth a town with blood."

Macbeth: the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. (2.1.72-4)

Commentary: Macbeth is about to send King Duncan to his judgment before God. In Matthew 25.31, we are told that "When the Son of man shall come in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He shall sit upon the throne of His glory/And before Him shall be gathered all nations..." to be judged.

Act 2, Scene 2

Macbeth: I have done the deed (2.2.22)

Commentary: Comparable to 1 Corinthians 5.2,3: "And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you/For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath done this thing". Macbeth surely knows these words well and is aware that he has already been judged for his crime.

Lady Macbeth: Go get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand. (2.2.58)

Commentary: The imagery of unclean hands comes from Matthew 27.24, when Pilate comes before the masses gathered to witness the trial of Jesus: "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it."

Macbeth: Whence is that knocking?
How is't with me, when every noise appals me? (2.2.72-3)

Commentary: Macbeth, of course, hears knocking because Macduff has arrived at the castle, and there is great emphasis placed upon Macduff's knocking since it startles Macbeth and his Lady and forces them to quickly cover up their involvement in the murder. However, the knocking can also be seen as symbolic, particularly if we make reference to the Bible. In Luke 12.36, we are told that the Lord "cometh and knocketh", and in Revelation 3.20, we are told again that Christ will "stand at the door and knock". The fact that even the smallest noise now unnerves Macbeth also has parallels in the Bible, particularly in Leviticus 26.36, where we are told that God "will send even a faintness" into the hearts of sinners, and "the sound of a shaken leaf shall chase them."

Macbeth: What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes. (2.2.74)

Commentary: A reference to Matthew 18.8: "Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting fire."

Act 2, Scene 3

Porter: Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key....Who's there, in the other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, 15 yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come in, equivocator. (2.3.1-22)

Commentary: Christ first mentions the "gates of hell" in Matthew 16.18: "And I say unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it". As Thomas Carter points out in his examination of Shakespeare and Holy Scripture, the Porter's reference to "an equivocator", who "committed treason enough for God's sake" is possibly related to the English martyr, Jesuit Henry Garnett, who was executed in 1606.

Lennox: The night has been unruly: where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say, (70)
Lamentings heard i' the air; strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatch'd to the woeful time: the obscure bird
Clamour'd the livelong night: some say, the earth (75)
Was feverous and did shake. (2.3.69-76)

Commentary: Lennox reports events similar to those found in Matthew 24:6, when Christ tells of the signs of the end of the world: "And ye shall hear wars and rumours of wars....For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places". Moreover, in his attempt to accent the divine right of King Duncan, Shakespeare draws parallels to the events surrounding the death of Christ, when "the earth did quake, and the stones were cloven" (Matthew 27.51). Duncan's death has also brought about a "feverous" and shaking earth.

Macduff: Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence
The life o' the building! (2.3.86-8)

Commentary: Macbeth has "broke ope/The Lord's anointed temple" -- he has destroyed the anointed body of the King. 1 Corinthians tells us that human beings are "the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth" in each of us. "If any man destroy the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which ye are". Shakespeare's use of the phrase "Lord's anointed temple" to describe Duncan's body highlights Duncan's status as divinely sanctioned ruler. It also emphasizes the heinousness of Macbeth's crime against God's consecrated sovereign.

Lady Macbeth: What's the business,
That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley
The sleepers of the house? (2.3.102-4)

Commentary: "Macduff has spoken of the great Doomsday when the graves shall give up their dead, and Lady Macbeth takes up the thought and speaks of the Trumpet which shall call the sleepers to the Judgment." (Carter 421) The sounding of a trumpet occurs several times in the Bible. Note Matthew 24.31: "And He shall send his Angels with a great sound of a trumpet"; and 1 Corinthians 15.52: "In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet: for the trumpet shall blow and the dead shall be raised."

Donalbain: There's daggers in men's smiles: the near in blood,
The nearer bloody (2.3.74-5)

Commentary: A possible reference to Psalms 62.4: "They delight in lies: they bless with their mouth, but they curse inwardly". Also a possible reference to Psalms 28.3: "Draw me not away with the wicked, and with the workers of iniquity, which speak peace to their neighbours, but mischief is in their hearts."

Act 2, Scene 4

Ross: Ah, good father,
Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock, 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp:
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it? (2.4.6-11)

Commentary: A reference to the events surrounding the Crucifixion, as reported in Matthew 27.45,51: "Now from the sixth hour was there darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour...And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; And the graves were opened."

Old Man: God's benison go with you; and with those
That would make good of bad, and friends of foes! (2.4.52-3)

Commentary: An echo of one of the fundamental teachings of Christ, told in Matthew 5.9: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God; and also in Matthew 5.44: "But I say unto you, love your enemies; bless them that curse you: do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you."

Act 3, Scene 1

Macbeth: For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!(3.1.69-74)

Commentary: Macbeth's selfish lamentation reflects the words found in Mark 8.36: "For what shall it profit a man, though he win the world if he lose his soul. Or what exchange shall a man give for his soul". Note that "mine eternal jewel" means Macbeth's "immortal soul", and echoes Christ's analogy of the soul to a pearl, found in Matthew 13.45: "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls."

Macbeth: Do you find Your patience so predominant in your nature
That you can let this go? Are you so gospell'd
To pray for this good man and for his issue,
Whose heavy hand hath bow'd you to the grave (3.1.93-8)

Commentary: A reference to Luke 6.28: "Love your enemies: do well to them which hate you. Bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you". Also a reference to Matthew 5.44, which is very similar to Luke 6.28.

Macbeth: every one
According to the gift which bounteous nature
Hath in him closed; (3.1.105-07)

Commentary: Here Shakespeare alludes to Matthew 25.15, in which Christ recites the parable of the talents: "And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one; to every man according to his several ability; and straightway took his journey".

Act 3, Scene 2

Lady Macbeth: Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content (3.2.7-8)

Commentary: Lady Macbeth's desires have been fulfilled, but she is nonetheless miserable. This reflects a common motif in the Bible, particularly in Ecclesiastes 4.6: "Better is an handful with quietness, then both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit". Also note the similarities between Lady Macbeth's words and the warning issued in Proverbs 13.7: "There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing"; and in Psalms 106.15: "But He gave them their request: but sent leanness into their soul."

Macbeth: Light thickens; and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood:
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse;
While night's black agents to their preys do rouse. (3.2.57-60)

Commentary: Compare to Psalms 104.20: "Thou makest darkness, and it is night: wherein all the beasts of the forest do creep forth."

Act 3, Scene 4

Macbeth: It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood: (3.4.147)

Commentary: A possible reference to Genesis 9.6: "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed". Also a reference to Genesis 4.10: "The voice of thy brother's blood cryeth unto Me from the earth, therefore thou art cursed from the earth."

Act 3, Scene 5

Hecate: And you all know, security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy. (3.5.33-4)

Commentary: Security is a caveat discussed in Eccles. 5.7: "Make no tarrying to turn unto the Lord, and put not off from day to day: for suddenly shall the wrath of the Lord break forth and in thy security thou shalt be destroyed"; and also in 1 Corinthians 10.12: "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."

Act 4, Scene 1

Macbeth: Let this pernicious hour
Stand aye accursed in the calendar! (4.1.148-9)

Commentary: Macbeth borrows Job's curse, found in 3.5: "Let darkness and the shadow of death stain it: let the cloud remain upon it, and let them make it fearful as a bitter day. Let darkness possess that night, let it not be joined unto the days of the year, nor let it come into the count of months."

Macbeth: No boasting like a fool;

This deed I'll do before this purpose cool. (4.1.71-2)

Commentary: A reference to 2 Corinthians 11.16: "I say again, Let no man think me a fool; if otherwise, yet as a fool receive me, that I may also boast myself a little."

Act 4, Scene 2

Lady Macduff: All is the fear and nothing is the love; (4.2.15)

Commentary: Lady Macduff's extended complaint over her husband's absence contains this direct reference to 1 John 4.18: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment."

Act 4, Scene 3

Malcolm: Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there

Weep our sad bosoms empty. (4.3.15)

Commentary: These lines are related to imagery found in Psalms 87.1: "By the rivers of Babel we sat, and there we wept, when we remembered Zion". For Malcolm, forced to flee his native Scotland and watch its destruction from afar, it is wholly appropriate to echo Psalms 87.1.

Malcolm: Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell; (4.3.28)

Commentary: A reference to the fall of Lucifer, reported in various books of the Bible, including Luke 10.18: "I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven"; Isaiah 14.12: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning"; and 2 Peter 2.4: "For if God spared not the Angels that sinned, but cast them down into hell."

Malcolm: When I shall tread upon the tyrant's head. (4.3.55)

Commentary: Imagery directly linked to Psalms 108.13: "Through God we shall do valiantly; for he shall tread down our enemies."

Macduff: Not in the legions

Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd

In evils to top Macbeth. (4.3.67-9)

Commentary: In Luke 8.30, Jesus asks an insane man, "What is thy name? And he said, Legion: because many devils were entered into him."

Macduff: the queen that bore thee,

Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,

Died every day she lived (4.3.127-9)

Commentary: A reference to 1 Corinthians 15.31: "I protest by your rejoicing which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily."

Malcolm: But God above

Deal between thee and me! (4.3.139-40)

Commentary: A common expression of covenant making in the Old Testament, found in 1 Samuel 20.23: "The Lord be between thee and me for ever"; and Genesis 21.23: "Thou shalt deal with me"; and Genesis 31.49: "The Lord look between me and thee."

Malcolm: Scarcely have coveted what was mine own,
At no time broke my faith, (4.3.146-7)

Commentary: Here Malcolm assures Macduff that he has never broken God's tenth commandment, given in Exodus 20.17: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, not anything that is thy neighbour's."

Malcolm: And sundry blessings hang about his throne, That speak him full of grace. (4.3.179-80)

Commentary: "Full of grace" is a common phrase to describe Jesus and the Virgin Mary, as seen in John 1.14: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we behold his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth"; and in the prayer "The Hail Mary", which begins, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee."

Macduff: Did heaven look on,
And would not take their part?

Sinful Macduff,

They were all struck for thee!(4.3.264-7)

Commentary: Here we find echoes of two biblical themes. The first is the theme of heaven watching over earth, as seen in Proverbs 15.3: "The eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good"; and 2 Chronicles 16.9: "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth". The second is the theme of the sins of the father visited upon the children. Macduff believes that his family has died because of his sinful behaviour. Compare this to Exodus 20.5: "Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children"; and Ezekiel 18.2: "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Malcolm: Macbeth

Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above
Put on their instruments. (4.3.279-81)

Commentary: Macbeth, and thus his stronghold, is "ripe for shaking". Compare Malcolm's words to Nahum 3.12: "All thy strongholds shall be like fig trees with the firstripe figs: if they be shaken, they shall even fall into the mouth of the eater."

Act 5, Scene 1

Gentlewoman: Neither to you nor any one; having no witness to
confirm my speech. (5.1.16-7)

Commentary: Comparable to Matthew 18.16: "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses, every word may be established."

Lady Macbeth: Here's the smell of the blood still: all the
perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand (5.1.46-7)

Commentary: As seen in Act 2, the imagery of unclean hands is derived from Matthew 27.24: "When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it". However, now that Lady Macbeth feels the full impact of her crimes, we recall other biblical passages,

including Isaiah 59.2,3: "But your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear/For your hands are defiled with blood and you fingers with iniquity; you lips have spoken lies, your tongue hath muttered perverseness."

Act 5, Scene 3

Macbeth: This push

Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now. (5.3.25-6)

Commentary: Compare to Daniel 11.40: "And at the end of the time shall the king of the South push at him." Macbeth welcomes the attack or "push" by Macduff and his army.

Macbeth: I have lived long enough: my way of life

Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;

And that which should accompany old age, (5.3.27-9)

Commentary: A reference to Isaiah 1.30: "For ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water."

Act 5, Scene 5

Macbeth: To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death (5.5.23-7)

Commentary: Macbeth's profound final soliloquy is rich with biblical imagery. The following are the most significant relevant passages from Scripture:

2 Corinthians 6.2: "Behold now, the accepted time: behold now the day of salvation."

Isiah 45.6: "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found, call ye upon Him while He is near."

Psalms 22.15: "Thou hast brought me into the dust of death."

Job 18.5-6: "The light of the wicked shall be quenched...and his candle shall be out out with him."

Job 8.9: "We are but of yesterday and are ignorant: for our days upon earth are but a shadow."

Wisdom of Solomon 2.4: Our life shall pass away as the trace of a cloud, and come to nought as the mist that is driven away with the beams of the sun. For our time is as a shadow that passeth away and after our end there is no returning."

Wisdom of Solomon 5.9: "Passed away like a shadow, and as a post that passeth by."

Psalms 52.11: "My days are like a shadow that fadeth, and I am withered like grass."

Macbeth: I pull in resolution, and begin

To doubt the equivocation of the fiend

That lies like truth: (5.5.48-50)

Commentary: In Scripture, Satan is the great equivocator, lying "like truth" to confound the hearts of men. The temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden is one example, and another comes from the New Testament, in John 8.44: "Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar and the father of it."

Act 5, Scene 7

Macbeth: But get thee back; my soul is too much charged

With blood of thine already.(5.7.7-8)

Commentary: An echo of Genesis 9.5,6: "And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man/Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed."

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