Kipling’s “Anglo-Indian” Bible

La Bible « anglo-indienne » de Kipling

Roberta Baldi

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/lisa/1449
DOI: 10.4000/lisa.1449
ISSN: 1762-6153

Publisher
Presses universitaires de Rennes

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 December 2007
Number of pages: 220-239

Electronic reference

Les contenus de la Revue LISA / LISA e-journal sont mis à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
La Bible « anglo-indienne » de Kipling

Dr. Roberta Baldi
(Milan, Italie)

Résumé

Rudyard Kipling est resté tout au long de sa vie en contact avec l’imaginaire et le langage bibliques qu’il connaissait bien. Lorsqu’il se lança dans une carrière littéraire dans les années 1880, ces derniers devinrent des centres d’intérêt autour desquels s’articula son œuvre. Cet article entend examiner comment Kipling s’approprie le matériau biblique, en partant notamment de sa première série de poèmes « Departmental Ditties », telle qu’elle apparut dans la première édition anglaise du recueil Departmental Ditties and Other Verses (1890). Ces dix poèmes offrent un vaste panorama des différentes stratégies transtextuelles qui entrent en jeu et qui vont de simples échos et citations intertextuelles à une activation hypertextuelle, en passant par une utilisation beaucoup plus complexe de références du paratexte et des métatextes. Ils indiquent également les directions prises par Kipling dans son dialogue ininterrompu avec la Bible qu’on retrouve dans sa dernière histoire, « Proofs of Holy Writ » (1934). A l’analyse textuelle s’ajouteront une discussion de l’arrière-plan culturel ainsi qu’un examen des implications qui pourraient découler de cette ré-élaboration des sources bibliques, dans la mesure où la série « Departmental Ditties » parut dans le contexte de l’Inde anglaise du XIXe siècle où Rudyard Kipling exerçait alors sa fonction de journaliste.
Kipling’s “Anglo-Indian” Bible

Dr. Roberta Baldi
(Milan, Italy)

Roberta Baldi teaches English and 19th and 20th century literature in English at the Catholic University of Milan where she graduated with a dissertation on Seamus Heaney’s poetics in 1996. She has published articles on the ‘travel’ theme in 17th and 20th century English Literature (in English Travels and Travelling, 2002; in To go or not to go? Catching the Moving Shakespeare, 2004) and on South Asian Literature (in Heads Downwards, 1997; in Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria, 1-2, 2002; Traduzioni Culturali. Voci dal Sudasia, 2007). She completed her doctoral studies on Rudyard Kipling’s poetics in February 2007, and is currently collaborating with The Kipling Society editing New Readers’ Guide notes on his early poetry.

Rudyard Kipling’s acquaintance with the Bible¹ is documented as early as his childhood at Southsea where, as both Hawkings and Ricketts report, “through [...] punishments he got to know the Bible almost by heart”.² Among all further contacts he had with the Scriptures, one is particularly pertinent to the present analysis, as it specifically refers to his Anglo-Indian sojourn: “Mrs. Hauksbee [...] presented him with a Bible early in his Indian career with the advice to study it carefully and follow its literary style”.³ This he undoubtedly did and considered good advice, judging from what he suggests Augusta Tweddell should do to improve her writing skills: “read the Bible thoroughly and see how much can be

¹ Following Greene’s critical approach in his article “The Influence of the Authorized Version on English Literature,” in which Kipling’s “Recessional” is quoted as an example, I refer to the King James Bible for comparisons and sources. (B. A. Greene, “The Influence of the Authorized Version on English Literature,” The Biblical World, Vol. 37, No. 6, June 1911, 391-401).
said in how few words. I regard the Book as a great help to literary composition”.

Even if in a 1919 conversation with Lady Gregory about childhood reading, Kipling “insisted that ‘one could not think too much of the influence of books read in the early years,” critics tend in effect to attribute Bible readings a long-lasting impact on his œuvre. A. J. C. aligns with the acknowledged notion that biblical quotations

prove the very wide range of Kipling’s reading as a youth and young man, and his wonderful memory, because I do not suppose for one minute that any of the above were worked in after looking up the original, rather the other way; the biblical words which were stored in Kipling’s memory fitted into the verse without an effort, and as being exactly those which were required.

Kennedy Skipton maintains that “[i]t would be difficult to name any living author who has a closer and readier acquaintance with the letter and spirit of the Bible than Kipling. It crops up constantly in his thought”.

Kipling himself, more or less seriously, claimed extensive Bible knowledge in an ironic poetic reply to Rev. Dr. Joseph Parker, stating that he knew “enough to annotate the Bible verse by verse”.

Hawkings upholds the widely accepted notion that Kipling’s biblical “knowledge coloured all his writing to his life’s end,” or, one might specify, to his last story, “Proofs of Holy Writ,” which portrays Shakespeare and Ben Jonson as involved in the process of preparing a translation into English of Isaiah 60 for the King James Bible. According to critics, the path that led Kipling to this mature literary outcome passes, however, through at least two other stages of biblical reference. Firstly, they note that the experience of World War I had the effect of changing his preferences: Ricketts points out that his pre-war work “had been strongly marked by allusions and attitudes drawn from the Old Testament,” and MacMunn confirms that “Kipling makes many allusions to the New Testament in his later stories.” Secondly, Archibald and Gribbin endorse the widely acknowledged appraisal of

---

4 “To Augusta Tweddell” [10 July 1888], Ibid., 248.
8 Anon., “The Limitations of Knowledge,” The Kipling Journal, No. 1, March 1927, 28. This article contains Kipling’s entire poetic reply for the occasion.
“Ressessional” (1897) as one of Kipling’s earliest works containing remarkable biblical echoes\textsuperscript{12}, a critical stance that, however, seems to underestimate his production of the 1880s.

Moreover, although Kipling’s life-long “dialogue” with the Scriptures has attracted a notable amount of attention\textsuperscript{13}, criticism has tended to limit biblical influence on his works merely to a matter of language, style and imagery. Amery maintains that the fact “that he has drawn deeply from the greatest of all fountains of English literature, the Bible, is, I think, obvious to anyone who studies his language”\textsuperscript{14}. Kennedy Skipton affirms that in Kipling echoes from the Bible emerge “in turns of phraseology, in quoted utterances from recondite sources unfamiliar to average students, in effective flashes of archaic biblical idiom [...] vivid turns of speech echoed from the Bible”\textsuperscript{15}. Beresford argues that “one of the chief reasons why Kipling uses the Bible is simply because his own inherent instinct for rhythm happens to agree with the rhythm of the Bible”\textsuperscript{16}. Moffatt points out that Kipling’s “resonant verse has a use of the Bible which is distinctive and vigorous [...] His style in verse betrays an amazing intimacy with the text as well as with the spirit of the Bible”\textsuperscript{17}. Griibon reports that “it is generally known that he used much Scriptural phraseology, and there is an impression that this was done mainly to get heavy effects and to sound portentous”\textsuperscript{18}. In the opinion of Hannay

one of the charms of Kipling is his extraordinary appreciation of the rhythm and beauty of the Authorized Version of the Bible. [...] Surely no one ever appreciated quite as Kipling did the wondrous rhythms of that quite matchless piece of prose which we call “The Bible.” Not merely in his prose works do these rhythms occur again and again, but sometimes—and here he is almost unique—he has fitted the prose rhythms into perfect verse.\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{13} The contributions on this aspect of Kipling’s work cited in this article necessarily represent only a set within a much larger critical corpus that has been limited here by the criterion of strict relevance to the topics discussed.

\textsuperscript{14} Lecture by L. S. Amery at the Annual Conference Luncheon of the Kipling Society, 1933, \textit{The Kipling Journal}, No. 26, June 1933, 59.


\textsuperscript{16} Discussion after George MacMunn’s lecture on “Kipling’s Use of the Old Testament,” \textit{The Kipling Journal}, No. 32, December 1934, 119.

\textsuperscript{17} James Moffatt, “Kipling and the Bible,” \textit{The Kipling Journal}, No. 36, June 1935, 115.

\textsuperscript{18} Robert B. Griibon, \textit{op.cit.}, 3.

\textsuperscript{19} Lecture by J. O. Hannay at the Annual Luncheon of the Kipling Society, 1939, \textit{The Kipling Journal}, No. 50, July 1939, 73.
As noted, many critics have commented on Kipling’s appropriation of biblical material. Yet, Gibbon\(^\text{20}\) declares that there is “an area of Bible illustration and reference which [he finds] to be almost completely overlooked.”\(^\text{21}\) This seems to be the case with passages in which Kipling’s “dialogue” with the Scriptures goes beyond language and imagery to reach the realm of transtextual elaboration, cases in which his use of the Bible is “not merely a matter of apt literal quotation of words”\(^\text{22}\) but rather a starting point which allows him the possibility of formulating his own personal re-elaboration of pre-existing materials. I will thus concentrate on examples in which Kipling’s biblical rewritings prove he is intentionally opening up new interpretative paths in directions that swerve away from the originals and recontextualize them in his late 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century, Anglo-Indian experience.

In this respect, Gérard Genette’s taxonomy as presented in *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* appears to be particularly pertinent, as it highlights the functional prerogatives of different kinds of rewriting. As will be noted, Kipling employs three main strategies to shape his biblical re-elaborations. In some cases he retrieves scriptural material and re-writes it, altering some of its lexical traits, an intertextually-oriented intervention that emphasizes what Genette calls “la présence effective d’un texte dans un autre”\(^\text{23}\), and takes advantage of the resulting semantic clusters, as will be shown in the first example discussed below. In other cases Kipling proposes characters whose names echo biblical figures, but develops their personalities, thereby distancing them from the originals, a hypertextually-oriented approach that highlights the “relation unissant un texte B (que j’appellerai hypertexte) à un texte antérieur A (que j’appellerai, bien sûr, hypotexte) sur lequel il se greffe d’une manière qui n’est pas celle du commentaire”\(^\text{24}\) creating a “texte du second degré”\(^\text{25}\). In this way, he emphasizes the cultural clash emerging in the contra-position of original and resulting texts, as in the second example presented below. In some other cases Kipling encapsulates biblical

---

\(^\text{20}\) In his article Gibbon reports that he was able to identify “248 Old Testament references (exclusive of the Psalms), 142 New Testament allusions [...] There are also 33 poems which have so much biblical language and atmosphere not readily assigned to specific texts that they may be classified as “general Bible background.” He also provides a list of the “distribution of his quotations: Genesis—45, Exodus—18, Leviticus—3, Numbers — 6, Deuteronomy — 8, Joshua—6, Judges—9, I Samuel to II Chronicles—34, Job—18, Proverbs—24, and one to four each from every other O. T. book, with a few exceptions. In the New Testament he quotes most liberally from the Gospels and Acts, and uses also all the Epistles (and Revelation)” (Robert B. Gibbon, *op.cit.*, 4-5).


\(^\text{22}\) *Ibid.*, 5.


borrowings in a metatextually-oriented approach that displays the “relation [...] de ‘commentaire’, qui unit un texte à un autre texte dont il parle, sans nécessairement le citer,”26 aiming at connoting his texts by means of widely known echoes, as demonstrated in the third instance proposed below.

As these strategies are already present in Kipling’s early works, the examples discussed are taken from the volume that he considered “the first of [his] books of verses,” that is Departmental Ditties and Other Verses28, and precisely from its opening sequence, “Departmental Ditties”, which collects “newspaper verses on Anglo-Indian life”29. The references are also intended to be instructive of the possible cultural aims Kipling envisaged in adopting such strategies.

“Book of Jobs”

The first passage I wish to discuss is in “The Story of Uriah”30. This poem, whose title, heading and plot echo “the episode in 2 Samuel where King David, lustful after Bathsheba, sent her husband, Uriah the Hittite, to his death in the front-line,” describes how Jack Barrett “is ordered to Quetta at the worst time of the year, leaving his wife in Simla to enjoy three-quarters of his income; without understanding the reason for his transfer, he soon dies.”32 In the “Departmental Ditties”, which, Kipling affirmed, were “born out of the life about me,” this poem clearly exemplifies the professional machinations, and their worst outcomes, in the social milieu the author lived in and wished to depict.

For the purpose of the present analysis, attention is focused on the lexical re-elaboration Kipling proposes towards the end of the poem. In the final stanza “the poet [...] dwells on the possibility of divine retribution”34 for Jack Barrett, and strikes a “sardonic note”35 envisaging

26 Ibid., 10.
27 Andrew Rutherford (ed.), Early Verse by Rudyard Kipling, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, 33. The same passage reports that Kipling assigns this special definition to Departmental Ditties and Other Verses “since it was the first book that I myself published”.
28 First published in Lahore in 1886 and soon reaching its fourth (first English) edition in 1890.
31 Harry Ricketts, op. cit., 90.
34 David Gilmour, op. cit., 35.
35 Harry Ricketts, op. cit., 90.
the moment in which “the last grim joke is entered / In the big black Book of Jobs” (ll. 27-28). Considering Kipling’s deliberate social focus and perspective in the “Departmental Ditties” sequence, it is reasonable to suggest that the term “Book of Jobs” may hint at a professional book in which individuals are registered with their mansions as well as the standard expression “black book” that is “a book recording the names of persons who have rendered themselves liable to […] punishment”, a group which in the text “might refer to Jack Barrett’s superior, liable to censure for banning him from Simla”.

Yet, the most vivid impression aroused by “Book of Jobs” is the allusion to the biblical “Book of Job” which recounts the story of a “righteous man whose motives for being righteous are tested through a series of personal tragedies”. Kipling thus establishes an overt parallelism between the scriptural character and Jack Barrett that centres on their pious spirit of endurance, providing thus an explicit “legendary” counterpart to the episode he is describing. Besides, when one considers that “the poem was a thinly disguised version of a topical scandal” and that “those who had known the real ‘Jack Barrett’, good fellow that he was, and the vile superior and faithless wife who sent him ‘on duty’ to his death, felt the heat of the spirit which inspired Kipling’s verse”, the allusion to the biblical Job with its reminder of the suffering of the righteous may give “those few lines an imperishable force”.

Within this ethical and cultural paradigm, moreover, the alteration of “Job” into “Jobs,” which might appear a mere formal device, and the capitalized “J” prove to be highly functional, as they become the focus around which all narrative threads of the poem coalesce. As a matter of fact, it is exactly by these two elements that Kipling succeeds in shaping a metonymic cluster which connects the theme of endurance, activated by recalling the figure of Job, with the machinations Anglo-Indians were exposed to in their “jobs”.

“Ahasuerus”

One of Kipling’s most fecund modes of biblical rewriting results in his re-creation of texts, as it allows him to manipulate his sources

36 OED online.
38 The Anchor Bible Dictionary on CD-ROM, Job, Book of.
39 Harry Ricketts, op. cit., 90.
40 Ibidem.
41 Ibidem.
42 “Jobs” rhymes with the previous “throbs” (ll. 26, 28).
intermingling episodes and characters in order to shape new, original literary figures. This approach is particularly evident in the “Departmental Ditties”, especially in the personalities of Delilah Abery with (“Delilah”), Potiphar Gubbins (“Study of an Elevation, in Indian Ink”) and Ahasuerus Jenkins (“Army Headquarters”). In all these cases Kipling establishes a nominal parallel with specific biblical characters and then re-writes their personalities and roles in his verses.

For the purpose of the present article, attention is focused on Ahasuerus, the main character in “Army Headquarters”43. This poem, which opened the Civil and Military Gazette “Departmental Ditties” series on February 9th, 1886, and has become the stable third text of Departmental Ditties and Other Verses ever since the 1890 English edition, recounts the way in which Cornelia persuades her husband, Tom, to transfer Ahasuerus, her lover, from his regiment, so that she can keep him by her:

1. Old is the song that I sing—
2. Old as my unpaid bills—
3. Old as the chicken that kitmutgars bring
4. Men at dak-bungalows-old as the Hills.

1. AHASUERUS JENKINS of the “Operatic Own”
2. Was dowered with a tenor voice of super-Santley tone.
3. His views on equitation were, perhaps, a trifle queer;
4. He had no seat worth mentioning, but oh! he had an ear.

5. He clubbed his wretched company a dozen times a day,
6. He used to quit his charger in a parabolic way,
7. His method of saluting was the joy of all beholders,
8. But Ahasuerus Jenkins had a head upon his shoulders.

9. He took two months to Simla when the year was at the spring,
10. And underneath the deodars eternally did sing.
11. He warbled like a bulbul, but particularly at
12. Cornelia Agrippina who was musical and fat.

13. She controlled a humble husband, who, in turn, controlled a Dept.,
14. Where Cornelia Agrippina’s human singing-birds were kept
15. From April to October on a plump retaining fee,
16. Supplied, of course, per mensem, by the Indian Treasury.

17. Cornelia used to sing with him, and Jenkins used to play;

18. He praised unblushingly her notes, for he was false as they:
19. So when the winds of April turned the budding roses brown,
20. Cornelia told her husband: “Tom, you mustn’t send him down.”

21. They hailed him from his regiment which didn’t much regret him;
22. They found for him an office-stool, and on that stool they set him,
23. To play with maps and catalogues three idle hours a day,
24. And draw his plump retaining fee—which means his double pay.

25. Now, ever after dinner, when the coffee cups are brought,
26. Ahasuerus waileth o’er the grand pianoforte;
27. And, thanks to fair Cornelia, his fame hath waxen great,
28. And Ahasuerus Jenkins is a power in the State.

The name “Ahasuerus” activates some biblical references44, among which the episodes related to the Persian king who chose Esther to be his wife45 and promoted her tutor, Mordecai the Jew46, to social success seem the closest to Kipling’s plot. From this narration, the poet seems in effect to retrieve not only a name for his protagonist but also the tripartite scheme of the characters (Ahasuerus47, his wife Esther and Mordecai in the Bible; Cornelia, her husband Tom and Ahasuerus48 in Kipling).

However, this structural similarity proves to be undermined by Kipling’s decision to alter the role of his protagonist and distance him from his biblical original. In this respect, several differences between the characters emerge:

1. A\textsubscript{1} is a king whereas A\textsubscript{2} is an insignificant individual who is mocked by his regiment;
2. A\textsubscript{1} chooses Esther as his wife after his former wife has disobeyed his orders whereas A\textsubscript{2} courts Cornelia to win her favours;
3. A\textsubscript{1} is Esther’s husband whereas A\textsubscript{2} is Cornelia’s extra-marital acquaintance;
4. A\textsubscript{1} grants love and requests to Esther whereas A\textsubscript{2} profits from Cornelia’s favours.

These are striking discrepancies that may lead to the conclusion that Kipling is simply retrieving a name and a general framework from the Book of Esther, without proceeding in tracing parallels between the

45 Esther 1:1; 2:16–17, in particular.
46 Esther 8:2, in particular.
47 Henceforth, “A\textsubscript{1}.”
48 Henceforth, “A\textsubscript{2}.”
original episodes and his poem. Yet, on a closer reading, there seem to emerge at least two relevant parallelisms with another character of the same biblical episode, namely Mordecai. In particular, in narrative terms both Mordecai and Ah$_2$ are granted successful social positions by courageous women, Esther and Cornelia, who speak out in their favour: in the Bible, Ah$_1$ fulfils Esther’s wish to reward Mordecai’s loyalty towards the king; in Kipling, Tom fulfills Cornelia’s wish to keep the protagonist by her in Simla. This parallelism is then reinforced by precise lexical echoes: Kipling’s “And, thanks to fair Cornelia, his fame hath waxen great, / And Ahasuerus Jenkins is a power in the State”. (ll. 27-28; my emphasis) closely replicate the depiction of Mordecai as “great in the king’s house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces: for this man Mordecai waxed greater and greater”$^{49}$ and, incidentally also the depiction of Esther as “fair and beautiful”$^{50}$.

As a matter of fact, however, the characterization of Ah$_2$ does not wholly overlap with Mordecai either, as Kipling provides the former with a final twist in personality. The “resemblance” between the two characters and their fate is eventually dropped, as it becomes evident that Ah$_2$ is allowed to climb the social ladder because of his cunning courtship of Cornelia and her favouritism, while Mordecai “rises” by honesty and loyalty.

Considering briefly the Biblical story of Ahasuerus and Mordecai, it is noteworthy that this episode relates to an age in which the Jews were defining their own role in foreign communities, Persian in this case. This aspect has been pointed out by Lee Humphreys who states that the tale of Esther and Mordecai may “present a model for a general life-style for the Jew of the diaspora”$^{51}$ and again that it “served to entertain and at the same time served the further purpose of presenting a style of life for the Jew of the diaspora”$^{52}$. It must also be considered that this tale was “placed in contexts that accented that national [...] element”$^{53}$ in order to depict how “one could [...] find a life both rewarding and creative [...] as a part of a foreign world”$^{54}$.

This cultural framework may provide additional relevance to the critical appraisal of Kipling’s Ahasuerus. By means of a sustained chronotopical shift that moves the poetic setting along both temporal and

$^{49}$ Esther 9:4 ; Esther 10:2-3 confirm “the greatness of Mordecai” and that he “was great among the Jews”, [my emphasis].

$^{50}$ Esther 2: 7, [my emphasis].


$^{52}$ Ibid., 222.

$^{53}$ Ibidem.

$^{54}$ Ibid., 223.
spatial dimensions, Kipling manages in effect to translate the context of the biblical hypertext to his late 19th century Indian setting. Within this milieu, Ah2, who embodies both Ah1 (representing the native element in Persia) and Mordecai (representing the foreign element within the former), may thus become symbolic of the “Anglo-Indian”, in his double status of a foreigner (British) within a native (Indian) community55. Significantly, it must be recalled, the Anglo-Indians were exactly Kipling’s subject-matter in the “Ditties”, as he explicitly pointed out writing that these poems dealt “with Anglo-Indian life in the Plains”56. Furthermore, Ah2’s double cultural background, which is also reinforced by his British surname, “Jenkins”, might have struck a chord with Kipling’s initial readers as well, as the “Ditties” were first published in the Civil and Military Gazette, a provincial English-language paper addressing British people living in Indian territories.

As a matter of fact, Ah2 may not only embody Kipling’s addressees but exemplify their ethics, too. By means of subsequent transvalorizations, that is, the mutation of some traits in the personality of the original character, Kipling activates a process of caricature which culminates in the transformation of the biblical originals (Ah1 and Mordecai) into a mean representative of a corrupted society (Ah2). The juxtaposition of the characters and of their moral qualities served the aim of emphasizing the degeneration of customs the poet observed around him.

It must be noted here that the ethical decline of the Anglo-Indian community is an issue which Kipling was particularly fond of evoking. It certainly prompted the poems collected in Departmental Ditties and Other Verses which, he states, were written “for a moral end”57; he also revisited this topic in one of the (never published) Prefaces devised for the first English Edition of the 1890 volume, which proves to be illuminating in its ironic depiction of degenerated Anglo-Indian features:

This is a book of verses on Anglo-Indian subjects. An Anglo-Indian subject is a person who was once an Englishman, but who through the effects of climate, overfeeding and underwork becomes something quite different. His duties are to live luxuriously on the money wrung from the teeming millions of India, who are all very highly educated, peaceful, and open-minded folk, more

55 The establishment of cultural parallelisms between biblical material and Kipling’s plots and characters has been widely emphasized; for instance, Ricketts reports the opinion of several critics affirming that “The Story of Uriah” “presented an Anglo-Indian equivalent” of the biblical tale. (Harry Ricketts, op.cit., 90).


57 “To Margaret Burne-Jones, 3 May-24 June 1886”, (ibid., 136).
capable of administering a government of their own. The Anglo-Indian is vastly inferior to the real Englishman in physique, endurance and mental power [...].

“Prelude”

This section investigates the way Kipling recontextualizes biblical material for meta-artistic aims. My discussion focuses on “Prelude”, the poem Kipling wrote to introduce the first English edition of Departmental Ditties and Other Verses.

1. I have eaten your bread and salt,
2. I have drunk your water and wine,
3. The deaths ye died I have watched beside,
4. And the lives that ye led were mine.

5. Was there aught that I did not share
6. In vigil or toil or ease,—
7. One joy or woe that I did not know,
8. Dear hearts across the seas?

9. I have written the tale of our life
10. For a sheltered people’s mirth,
11. In jesting guise—but ye are wise,
12. And ye know what the jest is worth.

Various elements of interest are present in the poem. One of the most striking features in its linguistic texture is the recurrence of “ye” (ll. 3-4, 11-12) opposed to the more modern adjectival form “your” (ll. 1-2). As the Oxford English Dictionary reports, the former is “The pronoun used (as the plural of thou) in addressing a number of persons (or, rhetorically, of things), [...] as objective [...] instead of you (in plural or singular sense)” whereas the latter “Originally the accusative and dative plural of the second personal pronoun [...] Between 1300 and 1400 it began to be used also for the nominative ye, which it had replaced in general use by about 1600”. As a whole, the form “ye” conveys an intense sense of formality and antiquity; however, considering that “in the middle of the sixteenth century there appears a tendency to associate ‘ye’ with biblical [...] language”, this pronoun may remind readers, especially those familiar with the Authorized Version, of biblical atmosphere, too.

59 Rudyard Kipling, Departmental Ditties and Other Verses, op.cit., 1.
60 OED online.
61 Ibidem.
Remarkable evidence of biblical rewriting lies in the substances Kipling mentions in the first two lines of the poem: bread and salt, water and wine. Whereas a search for “bread and salt” in the King James Bible produces no relevant results, the combination “water and wine” recalls in particular the episode of the Wedding at Cana⁶³, where guests drank water transformed into wine by Jesus in his first miracle. The first two lines of the poem call for a chiastic reading as well, in which “bread and wine” becomes a further pertinent combination. Indeed, it draws another series of parallelisms with biblical passages, both from Old and New Testament books⁶⁴, and in particular with the Last Supper⁶⁵, when bread and wine were shared among Jesus and the Apostles, and acquired their symbolic significance embodying His corporal presence among them in the Eucharist.

Further evidence of biblical rewriting may emerge also in ll. 3-7 in which the Narrator affirms that he has shared deaths, lives, joys and sorrows of “ye”. The atmosphere that colours this statement and the repetitive, emphatic use of “ye” may activate an interplay with those scriptural passages in which “this sense of […] a divine care which watches sleeplessly over the fortunes of the individual and of the nation, […] one of the most precious things in the Old Testament”⁶⁶ emerges, as in the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy or in the Psalms. About the latter in particular, McFadyen affirms that in the Psalter God is presented as the one who “endures […] a Father who pities his children […], a Friend who loves and listens to his human friends”⁶⁷ conveying “this living sense of the personality of God […] who […] is carefully watching it all”⁶⁸. In this case, then, Kipling’s rewriting mainly operates in terms of atmosphere insofar as the poet “does not directly quote but echoes words and feeling⁶⁹”, a strategy Griibbon notices also in Kipling’s use of Litanies.

The discussion of the cultural implications of biblical rewrites in “Prelude” must take into consideration the history of its publication. As reported above, “Prelude” was deliberately written to open the first English edition of Departmental Ditties and Other Verses. Because of its introductory function, this poem addresses Kipling’s “old” reading

---

⁶³ John 2:9; 4:46.


⁶⁸ Ibidem.

public, that is the Anglo-Indian community identified by “ye” and by saying that the Narrator has “written the tale of our life” (l. 9, my emphasis), and his “new” readers, the British “at home,” identified as “sheltered people” (l. 10).

Kipling was well aware that the publication of the Ditties in England would emphasize the deep cultural gap existing between these two reading communities, as in particular his British public knew nothing, or almost nothing, of life in Anglo-India. This awareness is particularly evident in both his public and private production. In one of his letters to Margaret Burne-Jones about the Departmental Ditties and Other Verses volume, for instance, he observes that “half of it would be Greek to you”70, and a few years later, in the (never published) Preface to my Anglo-Indian Public which he devised to introduce the 1890 edition of the Ditties, he states that “the English public are buying us now, and trying to find out in what the world it means71”.

“Prelude” voices this same interpretive “preoccupation” as the Narrator concludes by affirming that his poems recount tales “in jesting guise” (l. 11), that is adopting an apparently light-hearted tone, in order to approach readers who are not acquainted with their original cultural setting. Moreover, by stating that the Narrator writes with the aim of arousing “mirth” (l.10), the poem also makes it clear that, for the British public, the 1890 collection cannot be but merely entertaining material. Both these notions are touched upon in the Preface to my Anglo-Indian Public as the poet laments that in England “they insist upon regarding” the Ditties “as the diversions of an Oriental jester72”.

On the contrary, as the final two lines of “Prelude” clarify, the Narrator thinks that “you”, his Anglo-Indian readers, are “wise” (l. 11) enough to understand what lies beyond his “jesting guise” (l. 10), namely the depiction of the difficulties and drawbacks of living in Anglo-India, such as “heat, loneliness, love, lack of promotion, poverty, sport and war73”. Again, the above quoted Preface to my Anglo-Indian Public expands the same notion, as the poet directly addresses his readers in India with the firm belief that “You, however, can read between the lines I have written and know exactly how far the ditties tell truth [...] Therefore I want your sympathy, and now and again just one small sign across the seas [...] to show you understand74”.

Against such a complex background, then, the biblical allusions identified in “Prelude” may specifically serve its metatextual function as

72 Ibid., 26.
opening poem of the 1890 volume. In this respect, two aspects seem to be particularly pertinent: one relates to the first two stanzas of the poem and involves the biblical hints discussed above; the other refers to the final stanza and centres on the definition of the poems collected in *Departmental Ditties and Other Verses* as “jests”.

As “Prelude” was devised as a means by which Kipling could reach both his publics, the Anglo-Indian and the British, it is noteworthy that among all its symbolic and metaphorical references to the Scriptures, he seems to exploit one distinctive trait in particular, namely the “thought of communion, one of the deep notes in religion”\(^75\) that, Archibald affirms, “we find many times in Kipling’s poetry”\(^76\). It is indeed this strategical choice that gives realization to the vigorous cultural and editorial move the poet envisaged for his 1890 volume.

As already highlighted, Kipling’s initial and major addressees in “Prelude” are his Anglo-Indian readers. In this respect, the references to “water and wine” and “bread and wine”, as evocative of covenants such as weddings or meals shared among participants, and to an all-embracing entity who shares “joy or woe” with the “Dear hearts across the seas” (II. 7-8) convey the idea of an intense and long-established comradeship between the Narrator and his addressees; as a matter of fact, Kipling himself affirmed that as early as their first Indian publication in 1886, *Departmental Ditties and Other Verses* “just hit the taste of the Anglo-Indian public for it told them about what they knew”\(^77\). The present perfect tense of the opening lines stresses that this is the background against which the poet undertakes to approach his “new” reading public.

On the other hand, the same biblical imagery of communion may also act on a more subtle level, and indirectly influence his *new* reading public as well, insofar as the poetic collection is presented as aimed at entertaining, “mirth” (I.10), those at “home” by means of stories about those “across the seas” (I. 8). In this way, Kipling could also connect with his British readers and attempt to establish an intense emotional pact with them, too, that may lead to a “new” literary “partnership”. Incidentally, this bilateral, Janus-like intent also explains the fact that the imagery of communion presented in “Prelude” evokes and alludes to both Old and New Testament passages, as if Kipling metaphorically wished to reaffirm his “old”, and convey the intention to “sign” a “new”, artistic bond.

However, because of its position within the poetic collection, “Prelude” serves not only the aim of approaching Kipling’s, old and new, readers, but it is also endowed with the meta-artistic “responsibility” of

---

\(^{75}\) Warren S. Archibald, *op.cit.*, 61.

\(^{76}\) Ibidem.

\(^{77}\) “To Edith Macdonald, 4-5 December 1886”, in Thomas Pinney (ed.), *op.cit.*, 139.
presenting the poems in the volume as significantly attractive for these readers. In this respect, the Narrator describes his verses by means of a double reference to “jest” (ll. 11-12) and mainly connotes his tales with the semantic trait of light entertainment; yet, the final reference to “you” as able to go beyond the “jesting guise” reveals that their content is more serious than it may appear from their mere formal tone. This double-faceted texture of the verses collected in the 1890 volume closely echoes Kipling’s words as he affirmed that they were written “with a purpose [...] arrived at in a rather odd way”78.

Against the biblical atmosphere of the first two stanzas of “Prelude,” this final characterisation of the poems as “teach and delight” material gains symbolic relevance, as it evokes the role of parables in the Scriptures. The Preface to my Anglo-Indian Public provides the missing link that may confirm this strand of thought. In the Preface, the 1890 poems are in effect identified as “my sermons and moralities79”, a definition that configures them as closely relying on biblical representations employed for didactic aims. The same definition also helps clarify the final lines of “Prelude” signalling the parodic intervention by which Kipling has turned his 1890 poems/”parables” into much less serious, but rather more ironic and sardonic, “jests”. In this perspective, then, “Prelude” is consistently concluded by referring back to the same biblical framework as the opening stanzas.

Concluding remarks

The passages discussed above prove that Kipling’s idea of the Scriptures recuperates one of the senses which surfaces in “the converse use of bibliotheca in sense of biblia80”, that is of the Bible as a “collection of books or treatises, a library81”, where he could find narratives to elaborate on and then transfer into his own works. With regard to this aspect, MacMunn grounds Kipling’s use of biblical sources in the assumption that the poet was convinced that “the same human stories run through life as it was and is now”82. Pelly expresses a similar opinion sustaining that “on the principle that there was nothing new under the sun”83 Kipling “held the view that most of the world situations of to-day were wider repetitions of those recorded in [...] the Bible, and that our

78 “To Margaret Burne-Jones, 3 May-24 June 1886”, (ibid., 136).
80 OED online.
81 OED online. This sense is for instance focused in “1879 Maclear, Celts viii. 133 The Old and New Testaments, in the form of a Bibliotheca, or Bible” (Ibidem).
82 George MacMunn, op.cit., 112.
83 Henry Pelly, 300,000 Sea Miles, London: Chatto & Windus, 1938, 58.
various leaders and soldiers had their counterparts [...]” in specific episodes of the Scriptures.

In particular, as the subsequent hypertextual re-elaborations in “Ahasuerus” demonstrate, Kipling employs biblical references as means by which readers may contrast contemporary moral decadence with ethical exempla. This strategy then implies that “the Bible for him is by no means a faded antique; it is a volume full of incentive to high action, charged with living appeals to encouragement and steady and bright-eyed living”85. Besides, his critique of the degenerated society he portrays may again recall the Old Testament, and specifically the role of prophetic figures who would admonish their people for their own good, an aspect that has been emphasized by critics. Rutherford for instance states that “Kipling, it has often been observed, has [...] a vein of Old Testament prophetic fervour as he observes the backslidings of his age86”, and Kennedy Skipton details this notion affirming that Kipling showed himself of the kin of those splendid Hebrew Prophets, with whose works and mentality he is so exceptionally familiar. [...] He follows his compere of the Old Testament [...] in rebuking, exhorting, instructing, and when needful foretelling and warning his countrymen and contemporaries87.

The examples investigated above also evidence that Kipling was deliberately referring to the Scriptures as they could provide him with attractive symbolic clusters. In particular, the strands of imagery connected with the theme of “communion” and with “parables” that he employs in “Prelude” aim at striking a chord with his reading publics and attracting them to his œuvre. As a matter of fact, this deliberate appropriation of biblical material for evident meta-artistic aims can be related to Kipling’s wider habit of recourse to the Scriptures for passages that could allude to his own personal and professional life, as emerges in the well-known episode reported by Alice Macdonald Fleming to illustrate the way her brother described his success in Great Britain to his parents:

It was then that he sent a telegram to father in India; it just said “Genesis 45; nine”. But that verse reads — and do please remember that Ruddy’s first name was “Joseph” — “Haste ye and go up to my father and say unto him, Thus sayeth thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt; come down unto

84 Ibidem. This aspect is particularly evident in the above mentioned “The Story of Uriah” in which “Jack Barrett’s story, the title suggests, is an ancient one, re-told as often as wives are faithless and superiors vile”. (Philip Mallet, Rudyard Kipling: A Literary Life, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 26).


87 H. P. Kennedy Skipton, op.cit., 25.
me, tarry not ...” The parents did come down to Egypt and for a while we had a
coming house in EarI’s Court Road88.

From this discussion, then, it becomes clear that Kipling’s biblical
rewritings go well beyond the mere appropriation of imagery, rhythm
and language, in favour of “the ‘possession’ of [...] Bible material89”, in
order to accomplish both cultural and artistic aims which have been not
always clearly identified and examined. Indeed, referring to the poetical
works of Rudyard Kipling, Gibbon states that
detailed knowledge and sympathetic interpretation of the Bible are not usually
considered to have been in his field. Like many “popular impressions,” these
conclusions turn out to be astonishingly false when brought to the test of
discoverable facts. The contrary claim [...] can be amply justified90,
as this article has intended to show.

Bibliography

A.J.C., “Kipling and the Bible,” The Kipling Journal, No. 21, March 1932,
26-8.


ANON., “The Limitations of Knowledge,” The Kipling Journal, No. 1,
March 1927, 28.

ARCHIBALD Warren S., “Religion in Some Contemporary Poets,” The

BALDI Roberta, “The Story of Uriah,” The Kipling Society, June 5th, 2004;

GENETTE Gérard, Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré, Paris : Seuil,
1982.

GILMOUR David, The Long Recessional. The Imperial Life of Rudyard


89 Robert B. Gibbon, op.cit., 3.

90 Ibid., 6.


*The Anchor Bible Dictionary on CD-ROM.*

*The King James Bible.*

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (online version).