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The role and interpretation of Biblical elements in Lydia Millet's novel *A Children's Bible*

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Abstract

Lydia Millet's novel, *A Children's Bible*, is a thought-provoking creation work that draws attention to contemporary issues, such as environmental degradation, while also exploring the themes of generational divides and search for meaning. My paper explores the portrayal and possible interpretation of the Biblical elements and allusions in the novel utilizing Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation. It is also my intention to examine the purpose of these Biblical elements in Millet's narrative and to discuss how the implications of Ricoeur's theory reveal the role they play in shaping the reader's world and how this can be seen in the novel too, in the case of Jack upon his encounter with the world of the Biblical text.

I also discuss how a midrashic consideration of the novel and of the Biblical references aids in understanding the original Biblical accounts. My paper also points out how the author places the Biblical elements and narratives into a contemporary setting through which the timeless relevance of the Bible is emphasized. The goal of the study is to make sense of the Biblical elements in the novel, including the ones that are seemingly irrelevant to the narrative, and eventually to deepen the understanding of the relationship between Biblical narratives and contemporary literature.

1. Introduction

Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* is a climate fiction novel that emphasizes the importance of a sustainable relationship between humanity and nature. Throughout the narrative Millet alludes to several Biblical accounts and builds into the text numerous details referencing the Bible. She combines nature and the Bible through the person of Jack, a child who starts to read the Children's Bible given to him by an adult and then interprets it to the best of his abilities.

The reason I opted for this novel was heavily influenced by my personal interest in the Biblical texts and so when I first read the novel's title, I was curious what it might refer to exactly. Upon reading the novel I realized the multitude of Biblical parallels and details that I found in the text and since I wanted to understand them properly, I decided to look more into this topic. I also found Jack's character fascinating as he tried to make sense of the world through the Bible's lenses.

My hypothesis is that the Biblical elements found in the novel all play an important role in delivering the message of the novel and that no detail is built into the text accidentally or without a specific purpose; every Biblical detail matters. The motivation for this hypothesis stems from my experience of reading Millet's novel: at first reading some of the Biblical elements did not necessarily make much sense, but that changed after I pondered more about them. In order to understand and properly analyze the Biblical elements I decided to approach this topic through Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation, since he is best known among literary theoreticians for his Biblical hermeneutics and the children in the novel, especially Jack, also interpret the Bible. Another exegetical method I decided to take into consideration is midrash. The reason I included this in my paper is that midrash is the main exegetical method used – mainly in Jewish tradition, but not necessarily only there – in order to make sense of the Biblical text and to find its meaning even in contemporary settings. I combined these two theories in an attempt to extract as much meaning as possible from the Biblical elements and details in the story of this literary work and to see how the different Biblical accounts and the novel's narrative affect each other reciprocally.

Furthermore, in my analysis I intend to understand the way the author creates the parallels in the narrative with the help of Biblical elements and I also take a keen interest in understanding Jack's exegetical approach and the process of him developing a theology of his own that he eventually comes to use in his attempts to endow the world around him with some comprehensible sense.

2. The theoretical aspects of interpretation

2.1. Overview of Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation

The development of Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation was not an overnight procedure. It was a longer process to which a number of philosophers contributed. I outline some of the main points of this process briefly.

Edmund Husserl introduces the idea known as bracketing which he defines as the process of "set[ting] aside all previous habits of thought, see[ing] through and break[ing] down the mental barriers which these habits have set along the horizons of our thinking" in order "to learn to see what stands before our eyes" (1931, 48 qtd. in Tan et al. 2009, 3).

Wilhelm Dilthey acknowledged and established that the interpretation of historical documents needs to be done in their own historical contexts (Tan et al. 2009, 3). Dilthey also suggests that our primary source of understanding has its foundation in the things that directly influence us – given that they are the basis of culture (Crotty 1998 qtd. in Tan et al. 2009, 3)–, such as language, literature, behavioral norms, art and religion (1976 qtd. in Tan et al. 2009, 3).

Martin Heidegger (1967), from an ontological perspective, presents the idea of Dasein that denotes the essential nature of a human being. A person as a human being exists both in the world and of the world which results in the inseparableness of our preunderstandings or biases from the way we understand the world and our experiences. A life in the world inevitably means a series of acts of interpretation (Heidegger, 1962 qtd. in Tan et al, 2009, 3). This can be applied to the interpretation of text as well, as Tan notes: "Our preunderstanding influences our interpretation of this text but, in turn, is changed and enlightened by the interaction" (2009, 3).

Hans-Georg Gadamer is concerned with the development of an objective method in human sciences. He points out that tradition is an essential part of our life and that it is unavoidably linked to language (1989, qtd. in Tan et al. 2009, 4). Interpretation is a collaborative process since the interaction between reader and text is a constant discourse. This collaborative process is called the fusion of horizons by Gadamer because of the constant mediation between the past, i.e., tradition,

culture and experience, and the present horizon, that is the immediate experience, of the interpreter. (1989, qtd. in Tan et al. 2009, 4). As Tan notes:

As soon as we really open ourselves to a question, the understanding that we have as a result of all our previous experience or knowledge of the question is immediately superseded by the impact of our exposure to the new experience. Hence, our understanding is continually expanding as we expose it to dialogue with text, be that written or lived experience. (2009, 4)

In order to grasp Paul Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation, a number of key concepts need to be understood that play an important role in his theory, such as his view of text, distanciation and appropriation.

Central to Ricoeur's theory is his understanding of text which he defines as "discourse fixed in writing" and that it features "a fundamental characteristic of the historicity of human experience, namely that it is communication in and through distance" (1981, 145; 1973, 130). Ricoeur's concept of distanciation denotes the idea of, as Tan puts it, "a standing separate from or being objective in relation to the text" and categorized this concept in relation to the text into four themes: (a) text as a relation of speech to writing, (b) text as a structured work, (c) text as the projection of a world, and (d) text as the mediation of self-understanding (Tan et al. 2009, 7). Ricoeur (1981) points out the differences between text and speech. He states that when speech is converted into text, the discourse is not preserved entirely unchanged. Furthermore, the text does not necessarily remain faithful to the intentions of the author and might not accurately reflect what the author meant. Contrary to speech, text has a different audience that is distanced from the original context of the words that are textualized. In relation to text as a structured work, Ricoeur talks about three traits: (a) being longer than a sentence, (b) being codified in a certain structure and (c) being written in a unique style. Ricoeur calls the third modality of distanciation, text as a projection of the world, as "the world of the text" (1981, 140). Since hermeneutics can no longer be defined as the search for the authors and their intentions hidden behind the text, then "to interpret is to explicate a sort of being-in-the world which unfolds in front of the text" (Ricoeur, 1981, 140). Tan, in relation to this, explains:

Here his theory joins with Heidegger's (1967), which suggests that understanding is not understanding of others but, instead, becomes a structure of being-in-the-world. This is closely connected to Heidegger's hermeneutical circle in that the interpreter's inner world meets the unique world of each text to create a new picture or understanding of a possible world in the consciousness of the interpreter. (2009, 8)

Consequently, if the text is a projection of the world and we are also part of the world, as Heidegger (1967) established, then the interpretation of a text will also result in the interpretation of one's own self. For this result is the fourth distancing necessary which Ricoeur describes as the "distancing of the subject [i.e., the reader in the case of texts] from himself" (1973, 141). Ricoeur concludes that "in the last analysis the text is the mediation by which we understand ourselves" (1973, 141).

This brings about the concept of appropriation by which Ricoeur means "that the interpretation of text culminates in the self interpretation of a subject [i.e., the interpreter] who thenceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently, or simply begins to understand himself" (1981, 158). Understanding oneself better implies that the interpreter opens up towards the new text and incorporates the world of the text into their own personal world, thus creating a new self compared to the former one that existed prior the encounter with the given text.

These concepts together form Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation that provide a framework for understanding the relationship between text and reader and the result of the interaction between the two.

2.1.1. Applicability of Paul Ricoeur's Theory in the Interpretation of Millet's *A Children's Bible*

Ricoeur (1981) notes that there are two ways the reader and the interpreter can look at a text. The first option is to only take into consideration the internal parts of the text. He adds: "On the basis of this choice, the text has no outside, but only an inside; it has no transcendent aim" (1981, 113). In other words, the text is without context, without an external world and the author and the audience of the text have no relevance in this case. Tan explains:

What arises from it in this case is explanation, which is possible because of the objectivity of the text (distanciation) [...]. At this level understanding is relatively immature. It takes into account, for example, the meaning of the words as the reader understands those, which, of course, might not be the exact meaning intended by the writer. (2009, 9)

Ricoeur defines explanation himself as “to bring out the structure, that is, the internal relations of dependence which constitute the statics of the text” (1981, 161).

The second option of looking at a text is, as Tan puts it, “to restore it to a living communication” (Ricoeur 1981; Tan et al. 2009, 9). This is done by the process of appropriation which means the encounter through interpretation of the world of the text and that of the reader, creating something new, that is relevant for the reader. This can be done on several levels, depending on how many factors – such as context, author and other relevant information – the interpreters consider during their encounter with the text. Ricoeur describes this as “to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself *en route* towards the orient of the text” (emphasis in original; Ricoeur 1981, 161).

In the case of Lydia Millet’s novel, *A Children’s Bible*, as the first step, I will gather and group some of the Biblical elements and allusions found in the text and analyze them in the context of the novel without taking into consideration the context in which they originally appear¹. Next, I consider the context, that I neglected before, of these Biblical elements and I attempt to explain what can possibly happen when the reader’s and this novel’s world collide with each other. During this step of the analysis, I also consider midrash, which I overview in the next section, as a tool to explain the relationship between the Biblical elements used in the novel and their continuous recontextualization.

¹ The Bible’s originality is disputed, but it is certain that the authors borrowed ideas from the surrounding nations they found themselves in neighbourhood with. However, since then, the Bible has essentially come to be viewed as one single book that is authored by God through inspiration of the writers. Midrashic interpretation of the Bible, that will also be considered in this paper, similarly assumes the authority and the univocality of the Bible and as such, since I am interpreting a novel and *not* the Bible, whenever the word “Bible” is used in this paper, those connotations of the term are also meant.

2.2. Overview of midrash as a method of interpretation

The precise meaning of midrash given its complexity as a method of interpretation is difficult to define. There have been a number of definitions suggested by scholars, but it is disputed whether a precise definition of the term can be provided. Le Déaut emphasizes the idea that midrash cannot be strictly defined, but rather just described (1969, 401 qtd. in Strack and Stemberger 1996, 235). *Harper's Bible Dictionary* provides the following definition:

the type of biblical interpretation found in rabbinic literature [...]. Midrashic interpretation pays close attention to the meanings of individual words and grammatical forms, elucidates one verse by another verse, and relates the teachings of rabbinic Judaism to the biblical text. Midrash assumes that the biblical text has an inexhaustible fund of meaning that is relevant to and adequate for every question and situation. In a wider sense, the word midrash is used for any interpretation which has such characteristics. (1996, 683)

In essence, midrash emphasizes the timeless relevance of the Biblical text. Midrash can be divided into two categories: haggadah and halakah. The former is defined, according to Harper's Bible Dictionary as "the interpretation of the historical and religious passages of Jewish Scripture that are not legal in character" and "often supplement the biblical narrative". The dictionary adds that a number of Jewish retellings of the tradition falls under this category (1996, 396). Based upon this definition, Wright rightly observes that "[m]idrash [...] involves the belief that one of the best ways of understanding a story is to retell it, to augment the original narrative with additional details which 'answer' the questions it raises." (2007, 10) The latter, halakah, is primarily concerned with the legal texts of the Torah and with the way the Law can be correctly observed. Given the nature of this category, it must follow strict logic in order to establish a consistent system (1996, 398-399), while haggadah, in contrast, "can give a free play of imagination" (1996, 396).

Jacob Neusner considers midrash "a paradigm of creative and profound response to the biblical record", "a valuable alternative" to the dominant literalism that "enjoys the authority of true

religion” (1985 qtd. in Wright 2007, 10). Strack and Stemberger also note that “[t]he canonical (or perhaps more generally: religiously authoritative) text is certainly an essential prerequisite of midrash” (1996, 235). Wright further notes that Neusner “celebrates in The Midrash a literature which writes not about Scripture but »with Scripture«, by which he means that the Bible itself is the starting point for »a writing bearing its own integrity and cogency, appealing to its own conventions of intelligibility, and, above all, making its own points«” (2007, 10). It is important to add, as Strack and Stemberger point out, that midrash “may allude not just to a biblical text, but just as easily to a biblical event” (1996, 235). In other words, one essential aspect of midrash is the combination of the authority it holds on the basis of the Biblical texts or events it alludes to and the creation of a new story through which the author is able to influence, to some extent, the reader’s thoughts and actions. However, it is also important to bear in consideration that the author’s primary intention is not necessarily to influence the reader, but as it has been already mentioned earlier, it is to explain the questions raised during the reading of the Biblical accounts. As James Kugel observes:

Most of the narrative expansion found in rabbinic midrash have as their point of departure some peculiarity in the biblical text itself. That is to say, these expansions, whatever other motives and concerns may be evidenced in them, are formally a kind of biblical exegesis. (Kugel 1994, 6 qtd. in Wright 2007, 11)

Furthermore, Strack and Stemberger state that “the hearers’ or readers’ attitude to the expounded canonical text (or Biblical event) does *not* properly belong to the definition of midrash [...], since that would almost always remain unverifiable” (emphasis in the original). Still, this does not mean that it is not the purpose at all of Midrash to influence the reader. For example, Geza Vermes makes a distinction between “pure exegesis” and “applied exegesis”. While the former is concerned with textual problems in the text, such as contradictions or lacunae, the latter is concerned with “providing a non-scriptural problem with a scriptural solution” (1975, 62, quoted in Strack and Stemberger 1996, 238). In addition, the halakhic midrash is responsible not only for harmonizing different scriptures or for supplying details that are missing from the Biblical texts, but also for offering information that “provide instructions for the application of a biblical rule” and for “find[ing] biblical support for

regulations not yet envisioned in Scripture” and thus, influencing the reader to keep a given law or instruction based on the Biblical support found for it (Strack and Stemberger 1996, 238).

Overall, midrash is the exegetical method used in Jewish tradition by which the different layers of meaning of the Hebrew Bible are revealed. It firmly believes in the univocality and timeless relevance of the Biblical accounts that provide guidance in all situations and can answer all questions once the different meanings of the text are unlocked.

2.2.1. Applicability of midrash in the Interpretation of Millet’s *A Children’s Bible*

In the previous section I have provided a brief overview of midrash as a method of interpretation. The method is indisputably closely related to the Jewish communities and tradition, to an extent that the two cannot really be separated from each other. This is repeatedly emphasized by several definitions given by scholars. For instance, Jacob Neusner defines midrash as “a term given to a Jewish activity which finds its locus in the religious life of the Jewish community” (1983, 10 qtd. in Wright 2007). Strack and Stemberger also note that “[m]idrash is primarily a religious activity [...] [that] arises out of Israel’s consciousness of an inalienable solidarity with its Bible” (1996, 237). With this in consideration, doubts can rightfully arise regarding the compatibility of midrash as a Jewish exegetical method and novels. Harold Fisch plainly states that “[m]idrashim are not novels” (1986, 228 qtd. in Wright 2007). Fisch also points out that most contemporary modern novel writers “rarely submit themselves to the Bible in the manner of true midrash” and suggests that such authors are only “influenced” by the Bible, the Bible having become, “at the most, a fruitful source of ideas and images” (1998, 130 qtd. in Wright 2007, 16).

On the other hand, David Curzon, the editor of an anthology of *Modern Poems on the Bible* states: “Whether the poets knew it or not, and some of them did, they were writing midrash” (1994, 3 qtd. in Wright 2007, 13). I am inclined to agree with Curzon’s view presented here even though Wright notes: “That, I would suggest, may be to stretch the term too far. The poets need surely to be aware of rabbinic midrash to be said to be following its conventions” (2007, 13). I am not exactly sure why being unaware of the concept of midrash would necessitate that somebody cannot write

midrash. I would argue that if somebody produces a text that contains several midrashic elements found in rabbinic midrash, it can be considered midrash, at least in the wider sense of the word.

Nonetheless, even if we consider midrash to be strictly related to the Jewish tradition and rabbinic literature as an exegetical approach, it can at least be stated with confidence that literary works, such as novels, can be midrashic and can contain midrashic elements that can help us understand them. Even though Fisch, as Wright explains, “prefers to restrict the term midrash to a mode of rabbinic interpretation operating under constraints related to its function within a believing community for which the primary text has »unlimited authority« as revelation”, he still considers some novels as “[some] kind of midrash” (1986, 228 qtd. in Wright 2007, 15; 1998, 4 qtd. in Wright 2007, 15). He claims that they can “be viewed as an extension of the midrashic mode, which combines an act of reading with the fertile play of the imagination” because “[r]etelling stories, [...] whether in midrash or in fiction, »achieves two functions simultaneously—it gratifies the fundamental human need for novelty and also for sameness, for a constancy of meaning«” (Fisch 1998, 4 qtd. in Wright 2007, 15).

In my analysis of the midrashic elements of the novel, I explain why Lydia Millet’s novel *A Children’s Bible* can be considered a midrashic literary work from a certain perspective and I also argue why some of the concepts presented in the novel challenge the idea of constraining midrash as a method of interpretation within the context of Jewish tradition.

3. Analysis of the Biblical elements in Lydia Millet's novel

3.1. Introduction to the analysis

Lydia Millet's *A Children's Bible* is a multifaceted novel that follows a group of families who spend their summer vacation together in a remote mansion. The events are told from the perspective of Evie, the daughter of one of the families, who provides insight into how she and the other teenagers and children deal with the different challenges they face during this time period. The challenges they face prove to be rather extreme, while the parents prove to be problematic and mostly quite irresponsible.

Even though the novel has been well received – as that is evident from the fact that it was nominated for the National Book Award for Fiction in 2020 – secondary literature about it is still lacking with only a few studies. The novel's genre is difficult to determine due to its multifaceted nature, as mentioned before, since the concepts found within it touch upon many kinds of literature, but its main concern is climate change. It has been read as an ecological crime fiction by MaKenzie Hope and Kevin Andrew Spicer. They (2023) also consider the theological thread found in the novel and point out some of the Biblical parallelisms found in the novel, like the flood narrative. Another consideration of the novel by Charlotte Lancaster (2023) focuses more on the Biblical flood narrative and the idea of hospitality and the generational differences between the parents and the children. All these studies and even some reviews – for example one provided by Mira S. Alpers (2020) – are quick in pointing out that Jack, Evie's little brother, is making parallels between reality and the Biblical events. I intend to elaborate more on Jack's exegetical approaches using the theoretical background overviewed in the previous sections.

In this section I provide an analysis of the Biblical elements found in the novel and explain their relevance with the help of Ricoeur's Theory of Interpretation and midrash as an exegetical method. The relevance of the Biblical elements seems to be of much necessity considering the following quotation from a review of the novel in the *New York Times* written by Jonathan Dee:

Jack keeps noticing — and duly pointing out, to the uninterested others — parallels between current events and the stories in “my book.” There are more, even, than he catches: There’s a birth in a barn, a plague, a Moses, a Cain and an Abel, even a crucifixion. But part of the novel’s genius is that these allusions never really lead anywhere — they don’t coalesce into some superstructure of metaphor. The baby born in the manger is just a baby. The allusions aren’t symbols or clues; they’re just faint echoes, like puzzle pieces too few to fit together. They don’t mean what we’re used to them meaning. (2020)

Hope and Spicer (2023) express their disagreement with the quotation above, to some extent, and rightly argue that the Biblical elements do affect the way the readers see the novel as a whole. I argue, based on the principles of Midrash and Ricoeur’s theory, that even “[t]he baby born in the manger” has significance in the novel and impacts the reader. I suggest that the statement: “[t]he baby born in the manger is just a baby” is the result of a superficial interpretation.

3.2. Jack and the Children’s Bible

The very first allusion to the Bible appears in the title of the novel itself: *A Children’s Bible*. It is first referred to in the narrative as a regular book when the teenagers are discussing whether they should accept the invitation to the party on the yacht or not. This is the context in which we find out Jack’s opinion, briefly, on the matter, too:

Jack wasn’t much for parties unless they had a bounce house and birthday cake. He wanted to spend some time with his *Frog and Toad Treasury*, but after that, he said, he had to read another book. “One of the mothers gave it to me,” he said. “Like an assignment. She said I needed to read it.” (emphasis in original, Millet 2020)

Later it is revealed that the mother who gave the book to Jack is none other than the “peasant mother”, as Evie refers to her, and that the title of the book is “*A Child’s Bible: Stories from the Old and New*

Testaments” (emphasis in original, Millet 2020). The Children’s Bible is seen as the equivalent of the Bible itself by the other characters in the novel. For example, Evie asks: “That lady gave you a Bible?” or Jen, later in the novel, says surprised: “He’s reading the *Bible*?” (emphasis in original, Millet 2020). Still, it is pointed out by the owner of the farm that Jack’s book lacks the ending, the book of Revelation, reasoning that it is something that “children couldn’t handle” (Millet 2020).

There is one particular trait of Jack that defines him throughout the narrative. Consider the following fragments from the text: “He was a bit afraid of the waves, so he didn’t wade in the surf the way I did. Instead he sat by a tide pool for hours, searching for fish and other small creatures. He carefully replaced each rock he moved, *worried that he might hurt a crab*” (emphasis mine, Millet 2020).

He liked to make nature collections—moss, flowers, rocks—and build miniature dioramas in trays or baking pans. He’d nestle water features among the plants, sometimes containing minnows or tadpoles he’d scoop up in cups and jars and place into his scenes. Pretty soon he’d *get concerned for their well-being* and carry them back to the lake. (emphasis mine, Millet 2020)

As it is clearly seen from the quotations, Jack loves animals and nature to a great extent. As Eve puts it, “[Jack is] an insect fan. A fan of all wildlife, in fact” (Millet 2020). His love towards nature even puts others into life-threatening danger. When they are on the farm after the storm ended and a group of armed people attacks their group in order to get food, at some point, “[Jack and Shel herds] the goats through the shallowest part of the creek”, because they know that otherwise the goats would be killed. Because of this, the angels (who are simple people helping long-distance hikers by leaving them water and food) are tortured (Millet 2020).

Another aspect of Jack worth mentioning is his religious background. While the narrative does not reveal much about Jack’s religious beliefs before his encounter with the Children’s Bible, Jen does point out that “[Jack’s] family’s not even Christian” (Millet 2020). Eve also shares with us that: “For our parents religious education wasn’t a priority. Driving out of the city for the summer—taking a break from Minecraft on his tablet—Jack had gazed out the car window, pointed at the top of

Bethany Baptist Church, and *asked my mother what the long plus sign meant*” (emphasis mine, Millet 2020).

Clearly then, Jack’s knowledge of Christianity and the Bible is lacking. This is not necessarily surprising. He is still a child, as Eve points out: “[h]e still couldn’t tell time on a clock that had hands” (Millet 2020). However, Jack becomes obsessed with the Children’s Bible. As Eve notes:

Next to me Jack cocked his head thoughtfully and tapped the shoulder bag where his picture Bible was. He’d gotten fond of it—carried it everywhere and flipped through it so often it was getting shabby. He’d done the same with his first copy of the *Frog and Toad Treasury*. Read it into rags. (emphasis in original, Millet 2020)

He is always pointing out the similarities between what he has read and reality. For example, even in the context of this quote, he says: “They found a guy in some reeds in my book! A baby, though. They brought him to the princess of Egypt” (Millet 2020). There are seemingly no good reasons why Jack connects certain events with the Biblical stories. In the previous example, he basically connects two different events based on the sole reason that in both cases someone was found somewhere (cf. Exodus 2:6-7). Similarly, he also makes a connection between the Flood narrative and the incoming storm: “You know how, in that book the lady gave me, after they left that beautiful garden they got in a really big flood?” (Millet 2020). In this case too, the sole reason for the connection that exists is essentially just water falling down from the heavens. Another interpretation that might not make much sense for a Christian reader is Jack’s identification of God with nature. One could argue that God cannot be nature based on the Bible itself and so it should not be possible for someone to arrive at this conclusion (cf. Romans 1:25).

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Jack’s method of thinking and his interpretation of the Biblical texts and reality more factors need to be considered. According to Ricoeur’s theory, especially the third modality of distancing, the encounter of the reader with a text essentially means the collision of two different worlds that result in the creation of a new world in the reader that overwrites the former one. This collision is what we can see in the novel: Jack’s world collides with the world of the Bible and this results in something new. For example, it results in Jack’s midrashic

approach to the Biblical text² that is always relevant and every single detail of it matters. The fact that he considers the Bible as a book that bears some kind of higher authority is indicated by the notion that *he* uses the Bible for conducting a funeral:

For those [animals] that died before they could be saved, the boys dug a mass grave. They piled the fish bodies inside it and conducted a funeral service, with readings from Jack's Bible.

"My peace I give you," read Jack sadly. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Do not be afraid."

Shel had made a sign. His verse was written on it in block letters. He held it up in front of his chest for us to see.

ARE NOT FIVE SPARROWS SOLD FOR TWO PENNIES? AND YET NOT ONE OF THEM IS FORGOTTEN BY GOD. (capitals in original, Millet 2020)

His lack of belief in a personal God, as in Judaism or Christianity, does not discredit his midrashic exegetical skills and interpretations as he is still applying many of the principles of midrash in his understanding of the text and his reality. This challenges and weakens the idea that midrash can only be done or written within Jewish communities and tradition. The Biblical texts have influenced the world and literature more than any other writing and so it does not only belong to one community. This also results in the practice of midrashic interpretation among other communities, given that they adopt a similar view of the Bible as Jack does. Jack's midrashic approach is also evident from how he views the details of the Biblical accounts and how it is more than enough for him to connect one event with another even if there is only one single detail that matches in the two.

Ricoeur's theory can be further applied on the theology of Jack. The world of Jack is heavily influenced by his love towards nature, as already established earlier. He does not have any religious education either and therefore, the world with which he collides into the world of the text is heavily biased into a single direction. Jack is also taught science in the novel during his figurative collision

² In this case, the Children's Bible. However, I will also interchangeably refer to it as *the Bible* or *Biblical text* because it has already been established that this is how it is essentially viewed in the novel and therefore, I will not necessarily differentiate between the two.

with the Biblical text which further influences him in his interpretation. Ricoeur's concept of distanciation and appropriation help us see into the process of interpretation Jack performed. The first theme of distanciation that is, text as a relation of speech to writing, is already manifested in the text of the Bible. As Ricoeur notes, that when speech is converted into text, it is not preserved entirely unchanged. This allows for the Biblical text to become distanced from the author's original intention and allows for reinterpretation given the different audience. The third modality of distanciation, that is the world of the text, allows for the Biblical text to affect the reader's world. This can be seen on multiple levels in the case of Jack. The world of the Biblical text influenced Jack to develop a theology in harmony with his worldview, thus becoming religious in a sense. In harmony with Ricoeur's theory, Jack's state of "being-in-the-world" changed because of the text (1981, 140). This not only explains Jack's theology and why he views God as Nature and Jesus as Science, but it explains why he is incapable of understanding the Holy Spirit (assuming that Evie's view of the Holy Spirit, that it means art, is correct). Jack's world, being especially influenced by hard sciences, gives no inherent value to art, a concept that seems to be completely absent from Jack's worldview. This is why he is unable to grasp the idea of the Holy Spirit in his own reality.

Then, the fourth modality of distanciation and his concept of appropriation helps us understand Jack's behavior during the big storm, that is a parallel to the Flood narrative, and why he wants to save the animals even if the life of others is risked. According to the fourth modality of distanciation, the reader, i.e., Jack, is distanced from himself which results in one's self-understanding. To this connects the concept of appropriation, where the reader understands himself better and differently (Ricoeur 1981, 158). Jack, reading and interpreting the Biblical text, achieves this level of understanding and his identity changes. He no longer just loves animals, but his identity is mixed with Noah's personage. He has become the Savior of animals, just like Noah.

Jack's behavior even affects the novel's narrative in the sense that it becomes midrashic. Since Jack essentially re-lives the Biblical account of Noah and the Ark, the reader's understanding of the original account is also affected. One example to consider is that in the Biblical account of Noah, we do not read about how Noah and his family gathered the animals. On this sheds light Jack's [and Shel's] action: they trapped the animals. Thus, just as a Midrash, the novel, and especially Jack's actions, provide additional explanation of how the original account can be seen. Another additional midrashic detail that is repeated a few times in the novel is the quality of floodwater. It is emphasized

how it is full of garbage and dead animals, it being called a “toxic soup”. It helps the readers to reconsider how they imagine the way the floodwater in the Biblical account might have looked like.

Jack is not the only one using midrashic interpretation of the Biblical stories. Lydia Millet, the author, also masterfully applies midrashic principles in the narrative and completes Jack’s exegetical comments. Consider the following example:

We found a blow-up raft snagged in a clump of reeds in a cove of the lake. One of the flimsy rafts you use in a pool, yellow and muddy. On it lay a small man.

[...]

Next to me Jack cocked his head thoughtfully and tapped the shoulder bag where his picture Bible was. He’d gotten fond of it—carried it everywhere and flipped through it so often it was getting shabby. He’d done the same with his first copy of the *Frog and Toad Treasury*. Read it into rags.

“They found a guy in some reeds in my book! A baby, though. They brought him to the princess of Egypt,” he told us.

“No princess of Egypt here,” said Sukey. “No princess of anything.” (emphasis in original, Millet 2020)

While Jack correctly pointed out the parallel between the Biblical account of Moses and how they found Burl (the small man), the others were quick in dismissing his comment by pointing out that there is no princess of Egypt in this reality. However, the author excellently uses Jack’s comment in the story to introduce a longer parallel between the two accounts, Burl becoming the equivalent of Moses in the life of the teenagers. First, as Jack already pointed out, he is found just like Moses. Secondly, Burl and Val present the next testimony to the others:

“We saw something,” said Burl.

“A vision? I’ve been having those,” said Low.

“We saw a bush,” said Val.

“Whoa,” said Sukey. “Stop the presses.”

“Not sure what species, actually,” reflected Burl. “It had these brightorange flowers.”

Val echoed. “Orange flowers.”

“We went to survey the trees. See how many had come down. Then we saw the bush. Thing was, there were bugs swarming above it. Huge swarm of mosquitoes. Whining. I’ve never seen mosquitoes swarm like that,” said Burl.

He paused, but it felt like he wanted to say more. (Millet 2020)

This presentation of the events does seem to correlate with the account found in the Bible (cf. Exodus 3:2). Burl’s prophetic comments cannot be ignored either:

“Trouble’s coming,” said Burl.

The way he said it, somehow, it sounded real. It sounded like he knew something.

“Trouble’s not already here?” said Sukey.

“Maybe it’s a *plague*,” said Jack.

“A plague?” asked Dee, and stopped rubbing sanitizer on herself. “Bacterial? *Viral*? What plague?” (emphasis in original, Millet 2020)

Not only is Burl proven to be right later in the novel when the parents – who would equal to the Egyptians as the oppressors of the kids – suffer from dengue fever, but Millet uses Jack *again* in order to foreshadow this. I also have to point out how Millet’s novel requires a midrashic attitude to understand the cleverness of her work in the sense that every detail matters and must be considered. Note how the words “plague” and “Viral” are in italics in the original. It is obviously no coincidence that the parents happen to be infected by a plague that is viral:

“Ding, came a text alert.

From my father.

Dengue fever, the text said.

[...]

“The good news is, dengue fever’s not airborne,” said Luca. “And it’s a virus. So antibiotics aren’t called for.” (emphasis in original, Millet 2020)

3.3. ‘Irrelevant’ Biblical elements

The reader can attain a deeper level of understanding of the Biblical elements found in the novel with Ricoeur’s theory as it does not only explain what is happening with Jack in the novel and his interpretations of the text, but it also helps to understand the role of those Biblical elements that are present in the novel seemingly without any purpose, as Dee indicates (2020). What is then the purpose, for example, of the baby born in the manger? Following Ricoeur’s theory, on the level of the first distancing, the baby does not really have a purpose. On the level of the third distancing, however, the figure of the baby opens up the way toward the Biblical account of the virgin birth narrative. Then, involving a midrashic approach to the account found in the novel, the reader can gain a new understanding of the Biblical account. Sukey’s mother is abandoned by the Father of the child, as he cheated on her and said that he “never wanted the baby” (Millet 2020). The account further points out the reality of giving birth in the given circumstances. Jen says: “»How’d you get born?« [...] »You think it was a holy stork? All white with virgin choirs singing a hymn? As it flew by and dropped you in a golden crib?«” (Millet 2020). This sheds new light on how one might view the virgin birth account. First, it makes us think about Joseph’s feelings of the birth of Jesus. The question arises: did he want the child, i.e., Jesus? This is even more noteworthy given the profanation of the Biblical account in the novel’s narrative: the child is not a savior, it does not save anyone (though it does symbolize and foreshadow salvation), instead the baby is the one who is in need of being saved and this might suggest a secularistic interpretation of the Biblical account. Secondly, the novel’s

narrative emphasizes how the Biblical account of the virgin birth might not have been as beautiful and sacred as one might imagine. To arrive at such or a similar interpretation, one needs to apply Ricoeur's theory and his concept of distancing, viewing the different narratives as different worlds that interact with each other through midrashic interpretation and deepen the level of understanding of the reader in the cases of both texts.

Another Biblical element worth mentioning that seemingly has no relevance in the novel is "a massive sandcastle, a tower that rose to a point at the top" built by the teenagers based on Val's *vision* (Millet 2020). Even on the first level of distancing and through the first type of reading suggested by Ricoeur, the sandcastle – that later collapses because of the tides of the water – is not necessarily just a sandcastle in the text (Millet 2020). It can already be seen as a foreshadowing of the storm that destroys what men have built. However, if we consider the third level of distancing and consider this Biblical element as the way towards the world of the Biblical text, a more in-depth understanding awaits us. On the other hand, the original Biblical account in itself does not necessarily provide a satisfactory explanation. Even in a midrashic approach, it would be hard to make sense of the text given that there is no water involved in the story of the Tower of Babel as it appears in the Bible. The Flood already happened before that. This is when we need to look even further. Josephus, in his work, the *Antiquities of the Jews*, offers us a midrashic interpretation of the account of the Tower of Babel, providing an explanation why the Tower of Babel was actually built to begin with. According to Josephus, the Tower of Babel was built so that Nimrod and his men could go up to God and take revenge on him for having killed their forefathers by the Flood and the tower would have also provided safety against a potential second flood. Applying Ricoeur's third level of distancing, the world of the Biblical text (accessed by the Biblical element found in the novel) that includes also the other midrashic works on the account, a new understanding of both of these texts is achieved. First, if we keep in mind Ricoeur's first level of distancing and his first type of reading, then God in the novel is Nature itself. In this way, the parallels between the two – arguably three – accounts are more evident. People trying to build up their civilization in order to subjugate Nature (God) will inevitably fail. Further applying appropriation to this analysis, the narrative in the novel helps the readers understand their place in the world. Subjugating nature is not our duty. Our duty is to subject ourselves to Nature in order to live in harmony with it. Thus, by applying Ricoeur's theory and the midrashic understanding of this Biblical account not only aid the readers to understand the narratives discussed in this paragraph, but also to understand their place in the "being-in-the-world" (Ricoeur 1981, 140).

Lastly, I will consider the law as a Biblical element in the novel, similarly applying Ricoeur's theory and midrashic exegesis – since it is clearly a haggadic element in the novel – in order to make sense of it. The reference I am interested in appears in the following quotation: “»We have *the law* on our side, Eve,« said my father, drawing himself up straight, his eyes meant to be blazing. »The power of *the law*!«” (emphasis mine, Millet 2020). Interpreting the text within its own context – that is the first type of reading according to Ricoeur – would immediately lead to the conclusion that the law here refers to the police or something similar. Still, a connection can be made with the rules established by the owner of the farm that need to be followed in order for one to remain there. At this level of interpretation, it can be concluded that the woman represents the law – further suggested by the fact that she appears with a SWAT team – and that the parents were right in saying that they have the power of the law, even if they did not necessarily expect it to manifest this way (Millet 2020). While this is a plausible interpretation within the text, it is superficial and there is also no reason to stop here. If we approach this with a midrashic attitude and therefore, assume that words can have multiple meanings at the same time, all of them being correct simultaneously, then a deeper level of understanding manifests before us. The law can now be connected – through the application of Ricoeur's third level of distancing – to the Law³ found in the Hebrew and Christian Bible. The rules of the owner are evidently a parallel to the Ten Commandments and so they can also be connected to the law in the narrative. The Law is also given through Burl, who represents Moses in this contemporary setting. Both the narrative and the Biblical text (cf. Leviticus 18:5) point out that keeping the commandments leads to life; keeping the Law – or the rules of the farm – means salvation from death or exile (Millet 2020). Further applying Ricoeur's theory, namely his concept of the fourth modality of distancing and appropriation – that is essentially self-interpretation through the distancing of one's own self from himself – the readers find themselves being encouraged to follow some kind of law (1981, 158). This law most probably would be related to taking care of nature, following the example of Jack. In a midrashic sense, the interaction of the different worlds: (1) the reader's, (2) the Biblical text's and (3) the novel's narrative might be an encouragement for mainly those who adhere to the Torah to keep on doing so, even today, because the reward for it will not be neglected.

³ *The Law* is usually used to refer to the totality of the laws found in the Torah and so it should not be misunderstood as if it were a generic term for any *law*.

In a more general sense, the role of these Biblical elements is to provide the narrative with a sense of divine authority in order to maximize the effects on the reader. This results – keeping in mind Ricoeur’s concept of the world of the text – from the way the Bible is viewed today on a societal level. Since the readers are part of a world that mostly views this book as having divine authority, any reference to a Biblical account in the novel’s narrative will provide the narrative with a similar sense of power and thus, will impact the reader on a deeper level. Jack’s theological interpretations of the Biblical text help spread the novel’s gospel to everyone, not just religious people – given its secularistic nature – showcasing how the Bible still holds authority over the world the readers are a part of, regardless of their personal beliefs. From a midrashic perspective, therefore, the reason why the novel’s message is so impactful is because of “providing a non-scriptural problem with a scriptural solution” (1975, 62, quoted in Strack and Stemmerger 1996, 238), appealing to the authority of the Bible (cf. haggadic midrash). In addition, those Biblical details of the novel help the readers understand not only the reality they live in, considering the contemporary setting of the novel, but by combining Ricoeur’s theory with the midrashic principles, the reader can attain a deeper understanding even of the original accounts which the novel alludes to repeatedly, thus the novel attains both a halakhic and haggadic character.

4. Conclusions

In this study I have investigated the role of the Biblical elements found in Lydia Millet’s novel *A Children’s Bible*, trying to shed light on their importance and relevance even in a contemporary setting, emphasizing the timeless relevance of the Biblical text. I hypothesized that every Biblical allusion and element – even if seemingly a minor detail – is important in the novel and affects the impact of the novel’s message on the reader.

In order to see whether the Biblical allusions truly are meaningful in the text, I have used Paul Ricoeur’s Theory of Interpretation and combined it with a midrashic approach to the novel and the Biblical elements found in it. This reading of the novel has led to the conclusion that not only do the Biblical elements greatly aid the transmission of the novel’s message, through the implied authority behind those references, but these details and references help the readers to achieve a higher

understanding of (1) the novel's narrative, (2) the original Biblical accounts, and (3) [the readers] themselves. The combination of the two theories has resulted in the explanation of even seemingly irrelevant and meaningless Biblical references (e.g., a random sandcastle or a baby) in such a way that they have become relevant and meaningful – this on different levels depending on the world of the given reader – and thus showcasing the power of the Biblical text in aiding the spreading of the novel's gospel. The same applies for Jack's seemingly baseless comparisons between the events and reality (e.g., finding Burl) as the author uses those comments to introduce and foreshadow a greater parallel of the Biblical accounts. This enriches the readers' understanding of the novel's narrative and increases their appreciation towards the text.

The same way Jack understood himself and adopted the world of the Biblical text into his own world that eventually resulted in a higher understanding of himself, the reader can also achieve such a high level of understanding of the novel's text, exploring and adopting its world, through which the reader can similarly understand himself. While I was unable to take into consideration every single Biblical element found in the novel in this paper, based on the ones that I touched upon, it can be concluded – in harmony with the midrashic principles – that every Biblical element plays an important role in aiding the narrative of the novel. Biblical elements that can be taken into consideration in a possible future continuation of my research include references, among many others, to the crucifixion, Aaron or even the Latin version of Terry's name, Tertius (cf. Romans 16:22).

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