

VOLTAIRE AND THIERIOT: A STUDY IN THE LITERARY MANIPULATION OF SCRIPTURE

ASIDE FROM DAoust's work¹ relatively little has been done on the subject of Voltaire's use of Scripture in the correspondence. This has been due, in part, to the lack of any suitable edition of his letters until the appearance of the monumental Besterman edition, which contains some twenty thousand indexed letters, roughly twice as many as had appeared previously. An examination of the correspondence *in toto* reveals that Voltaire had frequent recourse to the language and imagery of Scripture, both of which he marshalled with consummate skill in the composition of some five hundred letters.²

It should be noted that in his citations from the Bible, Voltaire adopts a sermonic stance. Like a preacher he quotes Scripture in an effort to persuade, cajole and convince. As Gay has pointed out,³ he feigns a kind of militant Christian orthodoxy in order to parody more effectively a religious tradition which he abominated. In his letters he achieves this effect by juxtaposing lofty Biblical dicta, parables, and images to matters of a most mundane nature. His Latin quotations from the Vulgate, which are woven into the fabric of his sentences, are seldom identified as to work or verse. This suggests that his correspondents were as well informed about Biblical questions as they were about the literature of classical antiquity, to which Voltaire also alludes frequently without attribution.

In his letters to Thieriot,⁴ Voltaire quotes the Bible so often that it becomes a leitmotif in their correspondence. Both the Old and the New Testament provide Voltaire with materials to enliven letters which would have been otherwise rather pedestrian. Here Scripture becomes a rich mine from which the principal veins are to be extracted; it is Voltaire's "sacred" repository of "unassailable" truths. It is a corroborative testimony beyond confutation. With the apparent endorsement of divine revelation attesting to the correctness of his opinions he enjoys the prestige of Christianity's holy book.

As early as June 2, 1721, Voltaire asks Thieriot to become his official biographer. In this way, explains Voltaire, he would serve like Esdras compiling the life of Moses (91).⁵ In this comparison, Voltaire naturally emerges

as the more august figure. From the leader of the Israelites he moves to the traditional author of the Psalms, King David, when he utilizes a section of Psalms (42:1) to describe his altercation with Desfontaines over the publication of the latter's *Dictionnaire néologique*. He expresses his attitude toward him by announcing "Separa causam meam a gente iniqua et dolosa" (403), implying with typical irony that Desfontaines is the "unjust and deceitful man" with whom he wishes to be disassociated. Here the imagery of Scripture has become a weapon of calumny.

"They parted my garments amongst them: and upon my vesture they cast lots;" this verse also from Psalms (21:19) is employed by Voltaire to describe the political frictions which are complicating Thieriot's hopes for a pension. "Il semble que voici l'époque fatale de la maison d'Autriche," he states, "et super vestem suam miserunt sortum" (2291). On June 15, 1759, Voltaire refers to Frederick's writing ability by suggesting that the king had failed to achieve greatness because he had never begun any of his plays with the sensuous beginning of the Song of Songs (1:1), "Donnez-moi un baiser sur la bouche". At the end of the same note, Voltaire chooses the image of Jacob's ablution (Genesis 28:18) when he speaks warmly about his friend's forthcoming visit. "Quand vous viendrez me voir," he writes with enthusiasm, "je ferai tuer un chevreau, je répandrai de l'huile sur une pierre, et nous adorerons ensemble l'Eternel" (7633). What better way to express delight at the arrival of a friend?

Voltaire makes two derisive comments about the Old Testament in a letter dated August 11, 1760. Betraying his long-time antipathy to what he considered the gross inferiority and primitiveness of Israelitish religious practices, Voltaire writes: "Oui j'ai mon Moïse complet. Il a fait le pentateuque comme vous et moi, mais qu'importe" (8379). The Pentateuch is more amusing than Homer, he continues, and he reads it each time with "un ébahissement nouveau".

Quotations from the New Testament⁷ figure even more prominently in the Voltaire-Thieriot letters than those from the Old. At age thirty-seven he adapts to his friend Thieriot the description in Matthew (25:21) of the good servant: "Thou has been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things." This is the way in which Voltaire characterizes his relationship with the man who has been so effective in promoting his literary career (403). Speaking of their unbreakable friendship some seven years later, Voltaire evokes the same verse. "Elle [their friendship] est toujours éclairée, quand elle est si vraie et si tendre," he confides to Thieriot. "Con-

tinuez donc à le servir dans le commerce aimable de la littérature dont vous êtes chargé . . . soyez sur encore un fois qu'il vous dira un jour, Euge, serve bone et fidelis, quia super pauca fuisti fidelis, etc." (1386)

The taunt hurled at Jesus in Matthew (27:40) about his reconstructing a new temple in three days is Voltaire's motto for removing possible criticism of his recent historical studies: "Je suis donc dans la nécessité de rebâtir un second temple, et in triduo reedificavi illud. J'ai tâché dans ce second aedifice d'ôter tout ce qui pouvait servir de prétexte à la fureur des sots, et à malignité des mauvais plaisants, et d'embellir le tout par de nouveaux vers sur Lucrèce . . ." (564). The temple as a symbol of Voltaire's writings appears also in a letter written on February 6, 1736. In asking Thieriot's opinion about the dedication of *Alzire* he makes reference to the episode in Matthew (8:8) where the centurion asks Jesus to heal a palsied friend. When Jesus agrees, the centurion says: "Lord I am not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof: but only say the word, and my servant shall be healed." "C'était à Locke à lui dédier l'Entendement humain," comments Voltaire, "et je dis bien, Domina, non sum dignus sed tantum dic verbum" (969).

The kingdom of heaven, which Jesus suggests can be seen in "little children" (Matthew 19:14), symbolizes something far different in Voltaire's letter of August 7, 1738. For him it is the revelation of Newtonian physics. Speaking of his treatise on the subject he remarks, "A l'égard du mien il est jusqu'à présent le premier en Europe, qui ait appelé parvulos ad regnum coelorum, car regnum coelorum c'est Neuton. Les Français en général sont assez parvuli" (1509). Voltaire utilizes Jesus' farewell remark to the apostles, (John 14:2), "In my Father's house there are many mansions", in order to explain his temporary aversion to poetry and as a plea for tolerance. "Il est vrai qu'il [Formont] m'enveloppe dans ses plaintes générales contre les déserteurs d'Apollon," admits Voltaire, "je ne suis point déserteur, mais je dirai toujours multae sunt mansiones in domo patris mei, ou bien avec Arlequin ogunno faccia secondo il suo cervello" (1594). The same quotation from John with the substitution of *ejus* for *mei* is cited by Voltaire in praise of the French king who knows how to encourage the arts and literature. "Il est comme le père céleste," Voltaire comments (2155). The "mansions of heaven" have become in his lexicon the symbol for catholicity of tastes.

"Many sins are forgiven her, because she has loved much" (Luke 7:47). The sinful woman to whom Jesus grants expiation because of her loving care becomes the all-too-faithful Thieriot in Voltaire's note of January 19, 1739. Referring to the latter's involvement with Desfontaines, Voltaire comments

ironically, "Vos péchés sont grands, que la pénitence le soit, et que je dise remittuntur ei peccata multa quia dilexit multum" (1716). While Thieriot is compared to the sinful woman, Patu and Palissot are compared to the two pilgrims who meet the resurrected Christ on the road to Emmaus. In a letter dated November 8, 1755, Voltaire writes: "Il [Patu] s'en allait tous les soirs coucher au couvent de Genève avec monsieur Palissot, autre enfant d' Apollon. Ces deux pèlerins d'Emmaus sont remplis du feu poétique. Ils sont venus me réchauffer un peu" (5907).

Voltaire is not averse to identifying himself with the founder of Christianity. Indeed he chooses the image of the crucified Jesus (Matthew 27:35) to portray his own problems in Geneva. "On me met en pièces," he complains to Thieriot on March 3, 1757, "on se divise mes vêtements, on jette le sort sur ma robe" (6485). Three years later he preaches Jesus' doctrine of love (John 13:34) when he tells his friend; "Mes enfants aimez vous les uns les autres," but adds with typical Voltairean irony, "si vous pouvez" (8222). On July 7 of the same year there is an oblique reference to the birth of Jesus in Voltaire's discussion of Ramponneau. In this note he recalls the activities of Rahab, the innkeeper who sheltered Joshua when he was spying out the Holy Land. He calls Rahab the "aieule de qui vous savez," (8294), referring to her niche in the genealogical tables which are adduced by the evangelists to link Jesus to the Davidic line (Matthew 1:5).

In his letters to Thieriot, Voltaire displays his genius for appropriating the adversary's weapons to further his own cause. Weaving Biblical imagery into the matrix of his letters, he engages in a kind of game in which he attempts to abstract from Scripture those portions which serve his purpose. He doubtless enjoyed the challenge of selecting the best images from a work to which he had devoted a massive and ironical refutation.⁸

The chief device which Voltaire employs in the letters to Thieriot (so far as the Bible is concerned) is his symbolic metaphor. There is a vicarious transposition between the contemporary and the Biblical figure. In the course of his correspondence Voltaire refers to himself as Moses twice because both were great "publishers". Like David, king of Israel, he refuses to associate with iniquitous men and like Jacob he can show a hospitality which is unparalleled. Nor does he stop at drawing inferences even between himself and Jesus. Like the latter he will reconstruct his [literary] temples, although not necessarily within three days. More poignant is Voltaire's self-comparison with the crucified Christ whose robe is being dismembered.

Thieriot is honoured in several instances with the metaphorical image

of the good servant whose industriousness and faith in his master brought him eternal rewards. A somewhat more gratuitous comparison is seen in Voltaire's coupling of the virtuous prostitute who bathed Jesus' feet and Thieriot, both of whom are magnanimously forgiven for their sins. A rather colourful equation is found in Voltaire's pairing of the pilgrims on the road to Emmaus with Patu and Palissot. Just as the former were confronted with a vision of the resurrected Christ, the latter will perhaps derive a similar enlightenment in his, Voltaire's, presence!

Moving to non-human metaphors, we see Newtonian physics elevated to the "kingdom of heaven", tolerance represented in the "mansions" of heaven, and the Austrian wealth distributed willy-nilly like Jesus' robe. The only direct moral teaching which Voltaire quotes here is the admonition "love your neighbour," the possibility of which he promptly negates by adding, "if you can".

Because of his excellent training in the Jesuit schools, Voltaire acquired a seemingly effortless ability to reproduce citations from the Vulgate. These he astutely employed in conjunction with his ironical "sourire", thereby elevating mundane prose to scintillating and entertaining reading.

NOTES

1. In his "Voltaire et la religion d'après les lettres aux Tronchin" in *Mélange de Science Religieuse*, novembre, 1951, pp. 249-280.
2. For an analysis of Voltaire's use of Old Testament imagery in the correspondence, see my "Voltaire et les Psaumes", *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, Janvier-Mars, 1966, pp. 62-65; "Voltaire and Frederick", *Revue de littérature comparée*, Janvier-Mars, 1966, pp. 81-90; "Voltaire on Genesis: The Testimony of the Correspondence", *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, LXXVI, 1966, Heft 1, pp. 10-16.
3. Peter Gay, *The Party of Humanity* (New York, 1964), pp. 47-49.
4. Nicolas Claude Thieriot was Voltaire's friend and factotum. Pomeau (*La religion de Voltaire*, p. 20) writes: "Thieriot avait connu Voltaire chez maître Alain, au début de 1714, et malgré les infidélités les indécidables même du bon garçon, l'amitié ne fut rompu que par la mort".
5. Whether Esdras or Moses had been responsible for the redaction of the Pentateuch was a raging theological controversy in the eighteenth century. See Voltaire's article "Moïse" in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*. All quotations from Voltaire are taken from Theodor Besterman's *Voltaire Correspondence*. Figures refer to order in the series. The orthography has been modernized throughout.
6. Voltaire is probably referring to Bishop Warburton's *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated on the Principles of a Religious Deist* (London, 1757).

7. For a complete treatment of the images of the New Testament in Voltaire's narrative work, see Alfred Bingham, "Voltaire and the New Testament", in *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, XXIV, pp. 183-218.
8. Few people even within the discipline of Romance Languages are aware that Voltaire wrote a complete commentary on the Bible called *La Bible enfin expliquée*.

TO AN ANTIQUE CHAIR

Janet Lloyd

You are like that old aunt who came to tea
 On Sundays when I was young.
 "Be polite to Auntie, and treat her with respect.
 She is old, and very precious to us all."

She was very fat, this aunt, and very rich,
 Hence, thinking back, the "precious" bit,
 And she always wore a dress of blushing
 Rose brocade.

Sitting exactly as you do: squat,
 Legs apart, her fat blush backsides
 Straining at their stays; her righteousness
 Inflating more her huge hard bosom,
 She would tell me vicious tales of hell.

So though I'm told you're "precious" you must go.
 You squat Victorian bitch in blushing
 Rose brocade.