Neglected Biblical Allusions in Beckett’s Plays: "Mother Pegg" Once More

Certain biblical allusions in Samuel Beckett’s plays seem to have gone unnoticed. For example, the name “Mother Pegg” with its possible translation as “nail” and subsequent connection with crucifixion is faithfully repeated by most commentators on Endgame, but the much more immediate biblical allusion in that passage is ignored. What I want to do here, briefly, is to point out a few neglected references and indicate what their presence contributes to the play; and also to point out something about Beckett’s manner of alluding to the Bible that may account for the fact that some of his references seem to remain unidentified.

There are, of course, biblical allusions in Beckett’s plays that are unmistakable: Vladimir’s story about the two thieves is an obvious example. But the references I am talking about are less obvious for two reasons: first, they do not usually comprise an entire dramatic unit (the way Vladimir’s foray into a typical problem of nineteenth-century Higher Criticism does); second, they are usually so brief in their presentation that the reader/listener must be attuned to the slightest echo. The allusions I am talking about hinge only upon a salient word or two. For example, in That Time consider the phrase “the passers pausing to gape.” There is not much to confirm this as a biblical allusion;
yet we know that it is because Beckett has said so. And, also, anyone steeped in biblical stories would probably be reminded of the Crucifixion when hearing these words and not simply of a spectacular construction site or an interesting mugging on the upper West Side. This kind of biblical allusion depends upon verbal echo and good specialized memory: words and images heard so often and so clearly associated with their topic that they supersede all other uses and associations. The combination of "gape" and "passers" does it for this reference. In rehearsal notes for the German premiere of That Time, Walter Asmus records Beckett's remark that this phrase is from the Bible and records as well Klaus Herm's identification of the passage, "'Yes, from St Luke's Gospel'" and Beckett's interesting response, "'I looked it up, but I didn't find it, aha, Luke. . . .'"¹ Beckett is riding on the kind of memory I just described: the single word or two triggering an entire biblical allusion. He does not need to find the passage in order to use it; his audience does not need scholarship to recognize the words or feel their effect. What is operating here is not erudition but, rather, simple deep-in-the-bones knowledge of biblical story and the specific King James words and images that convey it.²

The process of synthetic memory behind this phrase "the passers pausing to gape" is particularly interesting and revealing. The allusion is as much to Mark and Matthew as it is to Luke. All three gospel writers record Jesus' being stared at and reviled as he hung on the cross: "And the people stood beholding" (Luke 23:35), "And they that passed by railed on him, wagging their heads" (Mark 15:29), "And they that passed by reviled him, wagging their heads" (Matthew 27:39). Luke's version contains a word that suggests the "gape" of Beckett's allusion; and Matthew and Mark provide the "passers." Furthermore, all three gospel writers are themselves alluding to Psalm 22, which is associated with the Crucifixion both in the New Testament and in the liturgy for Good Friday; that description of the suffering savior contains the phrases "They gaped upon me" and "They look and stare upon me." Thus all these passages contain Beckett's image of the "passers pausing to gape" but no one of them contains all his actual words,
which seem to come from a composite memory of these various related biblical passages.

Beckett himself has stated, "Christianity is a mythology with which I am perfectly familiar, so naturally I use it."³ And Vivian Mercier has described his own and Beckett's experiences with the study of Scripture and religion at Portora Royal, founded by the same King James I whose Authorized Version of the Bible so frequently appears in Beckett's work.⁴ The record of Beckett's use of biblical allusion is charted throughout various studies by virtually every major Beckett scholar.⁵ If some few references have remained without commentary, it may be that they have seemed to a given critic too obvious to mention; but it may also be that their very brevity, as well as their perfect "fit" into context, has caused them to pass unnoticed.

This seems to be the case with the Mother Pegg passage from Endgame. Hamm and Clov have been talking about the wasted state of the world; Hamm has protested that he does not know what has happened or whether it matters, and Clov challenges Hamm's feigned innocence by this accusation:

When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp, and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no? Pause.
You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of Darkness.⁶

This passage with its emphasis on oil for an empty lamp and its fatal outer darkness contains clear reference to the New Testament parable about the wise and foolish virgins, a story about salvation and damnation, ultimate life and death:

Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. And at midnight there was a cry made, Behold the bridegroom cometh; go ye out to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil; for our lamps are gone out. But the wise answered, saying, Not so; lest there be not
enough for us and you: but go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage: and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord. Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore; for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh. (Matthew 25:1-13).

There is an allied parable, also about a marriage feast (Matthew 22:1-14), that develops this imagery further, ending with a description of the damnation of one who is not properly prepared: “Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen.” Oil, lamp, hell, darkness: these are the words in Beckett’s passage that trigger the allusion.7 Kingdom of heaven, wedding feast, light in the darkness, the savior who comes unexpectedly: these are the words of hope and promise, the encouragement and the warning the parables contain. They express in little the whole Christian message of salvation, here used for ironic contrast, to intensify the sense of hopelessness in *Endgame*. Hamm is the god who damned by withholding, or by being unable to provide, the means that make life possible, whether it be bread in the wilderness (which he had earlier denied to the multitudes) or light in the darkness (which the lamp and the oil represent). That Clov’s accusation rankles is illustrated by the fact that a few moments later the phrase “Of darkness!” interrupts Hamm’s speculations about his own demise. It is important, I think, not to hear this phrase simply as a rather standard literary archetype in which “darkness” stands for death and other such negatives but rather to recognize the quite specific biblical allusion it carries.8 It may be that Mother Pegg’s name is supposed to suggest crucifixion. But that particular allusion seems much less germane to the details of the play than does the set of parables I have just cited. Yes, any suffering can analogously be called a crucifixion; but *Endgame* is rich in specific references to food, to bread, to inner place and outer wilderness, to light and darkness, to salvation
and loss—to what are the central images of these particular parables. The allusion itself does not change or add anything to the sense of misery and hopelessness that the play has previously established; it simply intensifies what is already there. The authorial memory that found those images—lamp, oil, darkness—relies on other memories to recognize them, perhaps not consciously, at the moment, but enough so that the play is drenched once more with a feeling of fatal loss, a loss not peculiar to this peculiar scene, but one for which there is a long history, a loss that the old stories of our culture have recounted again and again. The biblical allusion lurking in this particular passage universalizes it by quietly reminding the audience of words they have heard before.

This allusion in *Endgame* seems to me to be quite clear. There is another but more obscure use of the parable of the wise and foolish virgins in *Waiting for Godot*. One of the critical lines in that parable is the statement, “Behold, the bridegroom cometh, go ye out to meet him.” These words seem to be echoed in Vladimir’s triumphant announcement, “It’s Godot! We’re saved! Let’s go and meet him!” Like the attendant virgins of ancient ceremony, these two derelicts have waited for someone who they are sure has a special claim on them, and in waiting have proved themselves worthy. “What are we doing here, that is the question. And we are blessed in this, that we happen to know the answer. Yes, in this immense confusion one thing alone is clear. We are waiting for Godot to come—” (p. 51+). In the parable, of course, the bridegroom does finally arrive and take those who are ready into the wedding feast (an image of salvation and blessing). But in this play, Vladimir is wrong; they are not saved, as he says, or blessed (that is to say, Godot does not arrive); and Estragon is right, they are “in hell” (p. 47+). Once again the parable has served as ironic contrast to the dramatic scene: the received wisdom of Vladimir’s world is untrue. He may regulate his behavior and set his expectations according to the old stories, but the old stories do not observe their part of the bargain; he may keep his appointment, but the bridegroom does not. In the parable, of course, the bridegroom tarries, arriving finally at midnight; and it is precisely this detail
of the story that traps Vladimir, the never knowing if he has waited long enough: perhaps Godot will come, tomorrow “without fail” (p. 58+). Vladimir is not, of course, consciously referring to this parable when he exclaims, “We’re saved! Let’s go and meet him!”; but its ethic resides in him, as his echo of its words suggests. And the audience, however vaguely recognizing the reference, feels once more a grimly comic moment of blighted hope. “Your only hope left is to disappear,” Vladimir had said (p. 47+). Nonetheless, he and Estragon continue to wait, ambivalently hoping for a salvation, a deliverance, even though the various stories of salvation in this play mock any real hope they might have.

At this point, I must emphasize that I am not suggesting a Christian interpretation of Beckett’s plays (in fact, I think a Christian slant rather badly distorts them). Nor am I suggesting that Beckett is mining his plays with Christian symbols. Nor do I imply anything about his personal beliefs. None of that. I am merely interested in verbal echoes of biblical passages, passages so well known that their distinctive phrases and images are securely fixed in the memory of any ordinary church-goer or careful Bible-reader; phrases that Beckett uses easily, not with the rather deliberate erudition of a Joyce or an Eliot, but comfortably, as part of the natural flow of the dramatic scene. Almost always these allusions are ironic, but not in a way that twists a scene away from its surface meaning; their irony simply reinforces an irony already present.

And as I search to describe what I mean by an easy, integral use of biblical allusion, I find myself thinking about the lucidity that Beckett’s critics have noted in his prose style. Despite the erudition that lurks there, the sentences themselves are immediately available. The metaphorical coordination of the language is subtle; the connections among words and allusions (their buried images and associations) are solidly forged but not intrusive, not even, in fact, noticed unless we double back to examine what has made a graceful passage so very felicitous. The same felicity that characterizes Beckett’s prose style generally also governs his use of many biblical allusions. They merge perfectly and unobtrusively with his larger purpose,
present often only as subtle verbal echoes, whispered reinforce­ments of moods, themes, ironies already established. They blow through the plays like "the wind in the reeds"—a subtle yet significant presence.\textsuperscript{12}


2. It is interesting in this regard to note Alan Schneider's comment not about the cause of some of Beckett's words but about their effect: "Beckett's plays stay in the bones... His words strike to the very marrow..." ("Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle," in \textit{Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Endgame,"} ed. Bell Gale Chevigny [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969], p. 21).


7. Revisions in early versions of \textit{Endgame} also help sharpen the biblical associations of the Mother Pegg passage. In the typescript of \textit{Endgame} in the Special Collections at the Ohio State University Library, Beckett has changed the sentence "When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you sent her packing" by crossing out the phrase "sent her packing" and writing in "told her to go hell" [sic], thus making even more explicit the biblical reference.

8. Although it is true, as Richard M. Goldman maintains, that the various critical interpretations of \textit{Endgame} fall short of the play (as indeed they do with any complex piece of literature), it is also true that relevant information can help illumine the play. His question "Who was Mother Pegg? Can one die of darkness—in its physical or even metaphorical sense?" becomes decidedly less rhetorical in the light of the biblical allusion Clov's accusation contains. See "\textit{Endgame} and Its Scorekeepers," in Chevigny, p. 37.

9. Josephine Jacobsen and W. Mueller, in \textit{The Testament of Samuel Beckett} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), have identified a passage in \textit{The Unnamable} that also contains "oblique references to the twenty-fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew" (pp. 127 f.); they do not, however, identify the presence of this same passage in \textit{Endgame} or \textit{Waiting for Godot}. Though this particular identification in \textit{The Unnamable} is accurate, Jacobsen and Mueller tend throughout their book to overstate the religious elements in Beckett's work, moving beyond clear textual references and going so far as to compare Beckett with St. Francis and Thomas à Kempis (see pp. 49 f.).
10. *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 47+. This edition is numbered consecutively only on the verso side of each leaf; pages with numbers will be cited here by their designated number; the next, facing page will be given that same number and the designation “+.”

11. There are three biblical references to salvation in this play: the easily identified account of the two thieves and the parable of the sheep and the goats, along with this more obscure allusion to the attendant virgins. All have an ironic function.

12. This phrase suggests yet another neglected biblical reference. In *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir’s false alarm concerning Godot’s arrival is met with Estragon’s “Pah! The wind in the reeds” (p. 13+). The line has enough meaning on its own to make sense to any member of the audience; but those familiar with the Bible will immediately remember that the same image is used to refer to the Messianic herald who goes unheeded: “Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?” (Matthew 11:7). Thus the line has an overlay of ironic meaning. Literally, the phrase in context means, “there is nothing”; but through its biblical reference, the line suggests that once there was something or someone who went unrecognized; thus those who waited but did not detect him were not saved. The irony of this line in this particular play does not come from any suggestion that there really is salvation for Vladimir and Estragon if only they could see it, but quite the contrary, that there truly is “nothing”; all the many references to hope and salvation that occur in the play—whether as metaphors and idioms readily available, stories to be told, quotations to be identified—reveal the extent to which Vladimir and Estragon have been misled by their culture. They carry around with them shards of belief, snatches of biblical phraseology, fragments of philosophy and theology (as does Lucky in his monologue) that only tantalize them with desiring the impossible. Estragon is closer to their real situation when he remarks, “There’s no lack of void” (p. 42+). In their desert, no savior appears.